

Access to Higher Education

Open College of the North West

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

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

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

- i **unconditional confirmation** of renewal of licence for a specified period
- ii **conditional confirmation** of licence with conditions to be met by a specified date
- iii **provisional confirmation** of licence with conditions to be met and a further review visit by a specified date
- iv **withdrawal** of licence for operation as an AVA.

4 This is a report on the review of the Open College of the North West (OCNW). QAA is grateful to OCNW and to those who participated in the review for their assistance and cooperation in the review process.

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 event included an initial meeting between OCNW representatives and QAA's Assistant Director to discuss the process of the review and the requirements for the Overview Document (the Overview); the preparation and submission by OCNW of its Overview, together with a selection of supporting documentation; a meeting of the review team to discuss the AVA's submission and to establish the main lines of enquiry for the review; and discussions between QAA and OCNW to confirm other arrangements for the review.

6 The review visit took place from 19 to 21 June 2006. The visit to OCNW consisted principally of scrutiny of the AVA's documentation, including audit trails of the AVA's programme validation, moderation and monitoring processes; and meetings with representatives of OCNW. Representatives included senior AVA staff; members of the Board, the Quality Standards Committee and Access Programmes Panel; inspectors; moderators; coordinators; and stakeholders in HE.

7 The review team consisted of Mike Farmer, Head of Widening Participation, University of Gloucestershire; Professor Nicholas Goddard, Professor of Agrarian and Environmental History, Anglia Ruskin University; and Dr Andy Thompson, Director, Clifton Education Consultants Ltd. The review was coordinated for QAA by Kath Dentith, Assistant Director (Access).

The AVA context

8 OCNW is a large AVA, based in Lancaster. The organisation was established in 1975 by an agreement between the University of Lancaster, Preston Polytechnic and Nelson and Colne College of Further Education to provide a local

alternative to GCE A-Levels for mature students. It was awarded AVA status in 1990 and was last reviewed by QAA in April 1999, when a provisional confirmation of licence was granted. Conditions arising from the review were met and the licence confirmed in October 2000.

9 The majority of the AVA's provider members are further education (FE) colleges in the North West of England, and five of its six HE members are also based in the North West. In 2001, however, OCNW set up a formal relationship with the Higher Education Foundation Course Consortium (HEFCC) based at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle, and took over responsibility for Access to HE programmes within the HEFCC, delivered by a number of providers in the North East. OCNW also acts as the AVA for a small number of providers elsewhere in England.

10 Since the last review, OCNW has also increased its portfolio of work outside its Access to HE scheme. In particular, it now accredits and certifies provision which is included in the National Qualifications Framework, following its recognition by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority as a National Awarding Body, in 2001.

11 Most of OCNW's Access to HE providers deliver programmes based on the AVA's well-established Access to HE scheme which was defined in its present form after the 1999 review. OCNW is currently revising its scheme to meet the requirements of the Access to HE credit and qualifications specifications. The revised scheme will be implemented in 2008.

AVA statistics

12 The AVA reported the following statistics in its annual AVA report for 2004-05.

- Providers offering Access to HE programmes 46
- Access to HE programmes available 284
- Access to HE programmes running 197
- Access to HE learner registrations 2,521
- Access to HE certificates awarded 739

Principle 1

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

Constitutional matters

13 OCNW's Mission Statement is 'Building partnerships to advance and accredit lifelong learning for all'. Its aims include the establishment of provision 'to widen participation and promote social inclusion in education'. It also aims 'to serve...the interests of all learners, particularly disadvantaged adults' and 'to respond flexibly to changes in the educational, learning and vocational needs of learners, the economy and regional variation'. OCNW's powers, as defined by its Constitution, include the accreditation of programmes of learning; the certification of students; the implementation of quality assurance systems; and a range of associated powers necessary to give effect to its aims. The review team concluded that OCNW's aims were broadly congruent with the aims of the Recognition Scheme.

14 OCNW is an unincorporated association, a status that was confirmed in 1995, following legal advice. Its appropriateness was reconfirmed in 1999 and has been reviewed again more recently. The AVA stated in its Overview that it considered that this status was 'legally sound, establishes clear lines of accountability, minimises tax liability and protects the position and rights of OCNW administrative staff'. The review team concluded that the constitutional position was clear and readily identifiable through its formal documentation.

15 OCNW has a formal relationship with the University of Lancaster (the University) for the provision of certain services to OCNW by the University, principally administration facilities for financial and personnel matters. In return, OCNW waives the University's annual membership fee. Following a review of arrangements, a joint decision was made in

February 2006 to continue the relationship, with a revised Memorandum of Agreement and certain revisions to OCNW's Constitution. The Constitution states that the University accepts delegated responsibility for the administration of the day-to-day financial affairs of OCNW, acting under financial policies approved by the OCNW Board. OCNW staff are employed by the University under its employment terms and conditions, and OCNW's Finance and General Purposes Committee (F&GP) approves their appointment and guarantees that funds are available for the duration of any post. The Constitution requires that at least one member of the F&GP must be a representative from the University, but no special status is otherwise accorded to the University's representatives. The Memorandum of Agreement provides for the consolidation of OCNW's accounts within those of the University from 1 March 2006, as well as confirming the right of OCNW to appoint its own auditors, to obtain non-standard financial assurance reports and open its own bank account. The Memorandum is also clear that 'Ownership and control of all assets and liabilities remain with OCNW, subject to the routine financial regulations of the University'. The review team concluded that there was an appropriate level of formal accountability and balance of responsibilities between OCNW and the University, and that the nature of the agreement would not enable the University to exert undue influence or restrict the independent decision-making of the AVA.

16 OCNW has produced regular audited accounts for inclusion with its annual reports to QAA. The consolidation of OCNW's accounts into those of the University will ensure that they continue to be subject to appropriate external scrutiny.

17 The review team noted that OCNW, as an unincorporated association, had decided to establish OCNW (Lancaster) as a separate company for the purpose of owning the office premises and leasing them to OCNW. The Chief Executive confirmed that OCNW was able to enter into other formal agreements in its own right for the supply of services, for example, the development of OCNW's website.

18 The Constitution provides for the distribution of assets to members of OCNW in the event of its dissolution, but makes no reference to the distribution of any liabilities. In view of the fact that OCNW is an unincorporated association, the review team sought to clarify the question of liability of OCNW as an organisation and that of its individual members. The team noted that it was OCNW's policy to build and maintain a healthy level of financial reserves which could be drawn upon for relatively small business liabilities. The team was also informed that, as a matter of policy, if the reserves fell below a certain level, the continuation of OCNW would be called into question, and dissolution of the organisation would be triggered before any question of liabilities arose. Finally, the team was persuaded that the AVA met the licensing criteria in this area by the Chief Executive's assurance that OCNW purchased insurance through the University to limit its liability.

Membership

19 Membership of OCNW is open to a wide range of institutions including higher and FE institutions, and voluntary organisations. Full and associate membership is available, although the AVA's strategic plan for 2005 to 2008 indicates that, of a total of 62 members, only four were associate members. Further and adult education colleges are required to take on the obligations of full membership, most of which relate to assuring the quality of provision; higher education institutions (HEIs) may be full or associate members. At the time of the review there were six HEIs with full membership (one university having recently withdrawn from its associate membership), of which five were in the Government's North West region and one the University of Northumbria at Newcastle (Northumbria University) in the North East region.

20 The AVA reported 46 providers of Access to HE in its report for 2004-05, representing a doubling of the AVA's provider base since its last QAA review in 1999, and the Overview reported a small decrease (to 44) in 2005-06. Although no specific geographical boundaries are defined in the Constitution, the AVA's

membership reflects its origins in providing Access to HE services in the North West: of the 44 Access to HE providers in 2005-06, 29 were located in the North West region; eight in the North East region; and seven in other regions (three in the Yorkshire and Humber region, one in the East and three in the South East).

Governance and committee structures

21 At the time of the 1999 AVA review, OCNW was considering replacing its Council (which had potentially over 100 members) with a smaller Board, and it subsequently effected this change. The Constitution now provides for a Board and an Annual General Meeting (AGM) of members. The AGM approves the audited accounts and changes to the Constitution, and elects representatives from the Board on 'other bodies', although it has no formal role in the appointment of members to the Board or its committees.

22 The Constitution also provides for a F&GP; a Quality and Standards Committee (QSC) and an Access Co-ordinators' Committee. The F&GP and QSC report to the Board, while the terms of reference for the Access Co-ordinators' Committee state only that the Committee 'may' make reports to the QSC and the Board. The review team noted from the minutes of recent Board meetings that reports were routinely received from all three committees.

23 The Board has a wide range of powers and responsibilities, including strategy, policy and planning; monitoring performance against targets; ensuring that QAA's requirements are met; overseeing the relationship with the University; determining the membership and remits of its committees and other actions necessary for the quality, standing and longterm future of OCNW.

24 The Board has a maximum of 25 members, and its composition, as defined within the Constitution, specifies that members are drawn from six categories: the AVA's senior managers; senior managers from each of the HE members; senior managers from further and adult education managers; Chairs of the F&GP and QSC; college coordinators; and

representatives from other external parties. The AVA explained in its Overview that, in 2003, OCNW identified 'a lack of clarity in the written constitution in relation to the criteria for election of representatives to its decision making bodies' and that it 'addressed this by the addition of a related appendix to the constitution'. This appendix gives details of the various appointment procedures involved, including nomination and possible elections, co-option, and automatic succession, for the six categories of Board members listed above.

25 The review team noted that this appendix also provided details of Board and committee membership arrangements for the HEFCC. This is discussed more fully at paragraph 34, below.

26 The review team noted from the Board's minutes that it was rare for more than two-thirds of its 25 members to attend Board meetings, and was informed that consideration had recently been given to a smaller Board, although no formal decisions had been taken. While the team saw no evidence to suggest that attendance was affecting the proper conduct of the Board's business, the team would nonetheless recommend that the AVA take forward this consideration, to provide reasonable stability of attendance at Board meetings, and to support effective and consistent decision-making. In taking this forward, the Board may also wish to consider some modification to the formulation of the Board's quorum, to assure the representation of an appropriate range of members at meetings.

27 Board members (and members of the Board's committees) are normally appointed for 48 months and may be reappointed. Board members acknowledged that, in theory, members could be serially reappointed indefinitely, although, in practice, there was a natural turnover of membership. It was acknowledged that unlimited reappointment of individuals was not, in general, desirable: a view with which the review team concurred. The team would therefore recommend that the AVA reconsiders the Board's terms of reference and those of the Board's committees and considers setting a limit on reappointments.

28 The F&GP has responsibilities for setting the annual budget; monitoring compliance with relevant regulatory requirements; monitoring income and expenditure; and submitting the annual accounts for audit by the University. The committee has a maximum of 12 members, including the Chief Executive and three members appointed by the Board, with the rest appointed by the F&GP itself from a range of appropriate specified categories.

29 The Constitution specifies that the QSC has a maximum of 14 members, drawn from the same categories as the F&GP, and 'ensuring that no category shall be over or under represented'. It is not clear how questions of under or over representation on the QSC are determined. The review team would recommend that this be clarified.

30 The QSC is supported by two subcommittees which have particular responsibilities relating to OCNW's AVA responsibilities: the Access Programmes Panel (see paragraphs 60-63, below) and the Access to HE Awards Board (see paragraph 87, below). The Constitution states that the QSC 'considers and determines' QAA-recognised Access to HE programmes: this involves the formal approval of programmes, on recommendation from the Access Programmes Panel. The QSC also approves assessment procedures; monitors standards of provision; and considers and approves the annual AVA report. In practice, this approval is a recommendation to the Board for it to approve prior to the report being sent to QAA, in keeping with the requirements of the Recognition Scheme. Nevertheless, the review team considers that there is an ambiguity about responsibility for final approval of the annual AVA reports to QAA in the Constitution and would recommend that this be resolved by clarifying within the Constitution that responsibility for the final formal approval of the annual AVA report to QAA rests with the Board.

31 The Access Co-ordinators' Committee comprises all Access Co-ordinators and is chaired by an OCNW development manager. It acts as a forum for issues relating to the current and future provision of OCNW Access to HE.

However, other than this general remit, it does not have specific terms of reference. In view of its significance, the review team recommends that OCNW develops more detailed terms of reference for the Access Co-ordinators' Committee and considers whether its discussions might benefit from the inclusion of HE representatives in its membership.

Higher Education Foundation Course Consortium

32 OCNW acts as the AVA for the Higher Education Foundation Course (HEFC). This Access to HE course is delivered by eight providers in the north east of England and one in Cumbria, through a consortium arrangement, managed by the HEFCC. In 2001, when OCNW first took on AVA responsibility for the HEFC, it approved a plan and formal agreement for collaboration, which set out the structural relationship between OCNW and the HEFCC. Periodically, this agreement becomes due for review. The latest review resulted in a decision by OCNW's Board, in March 2006, to extend the agreement and to introduce changed formal financial arrangements until July 2008. This decision followed an audit of the relationship commissioned by OCNW from one of its inspectors, which was reported to the QSC in late 2005. The audit covered QAA's four Principles for AVA licensing: governance; management; quality assurance, enhancement and development; and academic standards. The report concluded that 'no evidence of devolution of responsibility of the AVA status from OCNW to the HEFCC was observed'.

33 The HEFCC is a separate unincorporated association, based at Northumbria University, which has its own committee structures and constitution, and this defines the HEFCC as an 'Access partnership'. All HEFCC Access to HE providers are individual members of OCNW in their own right, as is Northumbria University, and all, therefore, enjoy standard membership rights, including representation on the Board and its committees. There are also reciprocal arrangements, giving OCNW representation on the HEFCC's committees.

34 In addition to the appointment procedures for the six named membership categories on OCNW's Board (see paragraph 24, above), the appendix to the Constitution on appointments and elections to committees also includes a paragraph detailing arrangements for the representation on the Board and its committees of the HEFCC. This specifies that 'Two places on the Board are...reserved for colleagues from the HEFC/Northumbria University' to be drawn from four of the six established membership categories. The paragraph also states that two places are reserved on the Board's major committees for HEFC/Northumbria University. The lack of distinction between 'HEFC' and 'Northumbria University' in this paragraph (as well as the reference to the 'HEFCC' in its title) presents some uncertainty about the nature of the representation that is expected and whether it is Northumbria University, the HEFCC, or the individual providers of the HEFC that are being granted reserved places. Given that Northumbria University is entitled to Board representation through its status as an HE member, it appears that this arrangement potentially grants two, if not three, places to this one member. The review team considered that while it was appropriate for members of the Board and its committees to be drawn from a range of providers and other members, including those receiving Access to HE students in HE, the concept of 'reserved places' for any one HEI, provider or group of providers was not consistent with the requirement of the licensing criteria to ensure that the AVA is 'protected from the undue influence of any one, or a minority group of, its stakeholders' (licensing criterion 1.3).

35 The HEFC leads to two awards: a QAA-recognised Access to HE certificate, awarded by OCNW; and the Northumbria University Foundation Certificate. Comprehensive details of the HEFC, including its structure, delivery and management, are contained in its Definitive Document which is revised annually and formally approved by OCNW through the QSC. The Definitive Document also states that 'overall responsibility for the maintenance of the quality standards of the award within the

Consortium...for the QAA-recognised Access to HE lies with OCNW's Quality Standards Committee on behalf of its Board'.

36 The HEFCC Approvals Panel acts as a recognition panel for OCNW (see paragraph 63, below) and its recommendations are taken to OCNW's QSC for final approval of the course; students on the HEFC are required to register with OCNW; processes for moderation and course reporting are the same for the HEFCC as for the OCNW; OCNW awards the Access to HE certificate through its Awards Board; and statistics on student registrations and awards are included in OCNW's annual return to QAA. In these respects, it is clear that OCNW is the ultimate authority for the HEFC as an Access to HE course.

37 While OCNW is responsible for making all moderator appointments, the HEFCC moderators form a distinctive cohort, and the information made available to the review team indicated that all are staff of Northumbria University. The OCNW inspector's audit reports stated that, because the individuals involved were not Admissions Tutors, they were therefore 'sufficiently independent of the admissions process to cause no conflict of interest'. HEFCC moderators are otherwise appointed on the same terms as other OCNW moderators (see paragraph 79, below).

38 While the review team concurred with the findings of OCNW's inspector's report in most respects, it considered that reserved places on OCNW's committees (see paragraph 34, above) were not consistent with the requirements of the licensing criteria. OCNW is therefore required, as a condition of licence, to review and revise this appendix to the Constitution and ensure that no single institution holds a constitutionally preferred status through entitlement to greater representation than any other on its Board or major committees.

Principle 2

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

Strategic planning

39 OCNW undertakes a detailed and mature strategic planning process which involves scheduled meetings with all staff groups, consideration by the management team, the strategy review group and the F&GP, with final agreement and approval by the Board. The resulting strategic plan covers a complete three-year cycle, with a corresponding financial forecast, and is rolled forward with targets being revised each year. The planning process and presentation of the plan is clear, allowing for successful auditing of activity, and OCNW reports regularly to its Board on performance against targets.

40 OCNW has an appropriate self-assessment process to which the strategic plan is central. The AVA also demonstrated its capacity for critical self-appraisal through its process of self-evaluation for the present review, the outcomes of which were presented to the review team in the Synoptic Self Evaluation for the process of AVA review. This recent self-evaluation of the organisation's AVA functions was made against the AVA licensing criteria and resulted in a clear statement of outcomes and plans for follow-up actions, a number of which have already been completed. The QSC receives regular reports on progress against the actions and key tasks identified through this process.

41 The strategic plan has a separate strategy for Access to HE with stated aims and objectives for this element of its business, and specific actions for each year. The Chief Executive explained that the AVA's strategy for Access to HE is based on the continuing development of the AVA's offer to provide the most flexible programme possible, within which members could select pathways and programmes that best meet their needs. This approach is evident in the objectives for

development of the current strategic plan, which includes objectives relating, for example, to maintaining 'a flexible scheme embracing a large range of subjects from which learners and centres can select a route suitable for their own purposes' and approving 'subject awards which are centre-devised and to develop those subject awards in consultation with centres'. The review team noted that the targets for 2005-06 also reflected this broad approach, with specific actions relating to enhancing the relevance of the scheme for the target groups identified; involving provider centres in the AVA's new Access to HE scheme; and exploring the development of specific subject awards to support local work on nuclear decommissioning. The AVA also had a specific target in 2005-06 to improve achievement rates on QAA-recognised Access to HE programmes.

Enhancement and promotion

42 The AVA holds a well-received annual conference and other events which provide opportunities for enhancement activities. It also makes use of the Access Co-ordinators' Committee as a mechanism for bringing practitioners' attention to the possibilities of its Access to HE offer and has produced a marketing leaflet to assist in its promotion of Access to HE. However, one weakness identified by OCNW's recent self-evaluation was the AVA's promotion of Access to HE. The AVA's principal response to this identified weakness has been to create a new development manager post, with a remit for promotion and sales. The AVA's marketing strategy also includes a specific target relating to the promotion of its new Access to HE scheme, and the AVA intends to devise more marketing materials for the scheme.

43 The AVA's approach to development has been, to date, largely reactive, responding to requests for validation of new provision and supporting curriculum development, in keeping with the Chief Executive's account of the main thrust of strategic development within the AVA. This kind of development is chiefly managed through the development of new subject awards (see paragraph 60, below) which providers may propose in order to

provide new elements and further choice within OCNW's 12 established pathways. The AVA can also undertake developments centrally, in order to further its strategic objectives. A notable example of the AVA's attempts to meet strategic objectives through curriculum development is the Islamic Studies level 3 subject award, which was developed to 'improve recruitment of learners from ethnic minorities'. Unfortunately, this has not yet achieved its aim, as it has not been taken up by providers for inclusion within programmes. The reasons for this are not certain, although the AVA suggested that such developments may be better undertaken by providers who have more direct contact with local groups.

44 The addition of the development manager post and a more focused approach to introducing the full possibilities of its scheme to providers may help OCNW to expand its business, and thereby extend the reach of Access to HE provision, but the review team was not persuaded that these mechanisms alone would enable the AVA to meet its licence obligations to take account of 'prevailing regional and national strategies' (AVA licensing criteria 2.1 b) in its promotion and development activity. The team would not disagree with the AVA's suggestion that, in order to respond to local needs, curriculum development needs to make use of providers' local knowledge, but would also recommend that the AVA should consider how a more developed research function might enable it to support and direct purposeful curriculum development. Such research might include fuller analysis of its own and comparative regional data; market research; and systematically gathering intelligence about local and regional initiatives.

45 Several of the objectives of the strategic plan reflect AVA licensing criteria which relate to promotion and development. The requirement in the licensing criteria that an AVA should engage with 'other organisations and agencies in its region which have responsibilities or shared interests in educational opportunities for adults' (AVA licensing criteria 2.2), for example, is presented as an objective in the AVA's

strategic plan ('to work with other organisations and agencies in its region which have responsibilities or shared interests in educational opportunities for adults'). Similarly, OCNW's objective 'to identify those groups in its locality and region which have most need of further opportunities to progress to higher education and work with its provider centres towards the inclusion of those groups...' directly mirrors the AVA licensing criterion relating to an AVA's responsibilities for promotion. The review team was therefore particularly interested to see how this objective was to be taken forward and noted the further statement that 'this work will be carried out through its work with member centres and other interested organisations'. The team considered that the AVA could usefully consider how it might identify, and forge stronger and more productive connections with, 'other organisations and agencies in its region' which might be able to offer experience and expertise which is not available within OCNW itself. (This topic is discussed more fully in paragraphs 68-73.)

Operations and management

46 Financial matters are dealt with efficiently and rigorously at the operational level, appropriately supporting the work of the F&GP. Financial planning is clearly linked to strategic planning, and the current organisation and structure has brought OCNW a much improved financial position over the last two years, with the opportunity to develop a significant reserve, sufficient to cover its operating costs for a 12-month period.

47 The staffing structure of OCNW supports the responsibilities involved in holding an AVA licence. Accountability is clear and posts reflect this in their job descriptions. Appraisal is well embedded and business needs analysis methods are used to examine staffing needs. The AVA has established an appropriate grievance procedure for staff. It has also developed a thorough complaints and appeals process which involves external participation at appropriate points. The AVA's policy on equal opportunities is comprehensive.

Communications

48 In addition to the promotional mechanisms mentioned above (paragraph 42), stakeholders are kept informed about OCNW's activities through a regular newsletter, meetings and circulation of relevant documents. OCNW is also involved in a major redevelopment of its website, due to be launched early in 2006-07, as a part of its marketing strategy.

49 Communication to providers about operational matters is good and providers are also kept informed of broader developments, for example, in relation to the AVA's plans for responding to the new credit and qualification specifications for Access to HE. The AVA also maintains a direct communication channel with senior managers in provider institutions through its Senior Curriculum Manager Network: an email alert system that highlights current and important issues in a succinct format.

50 The comprehensive Access Programmes Handbook contains details of the AVA's procedures, set out in full and appropriate detail. The most recent edition has been produced in keeping with the requirements of the Access to HE credit and qualification specifications and, as such, is an invaluable document for both Access to HE providers and receivers. The same high standard of operational documentation is also found in the Moderators' Information File and the Access Co-ordinators' File, both of which clearly describe the processes and procedures required for effective operation and moderation of Access to HE.

Data collection and management

51 OCNW's statistical return to QAA has been a cause of concern over a number of years. In particular, while the AVA has reported high numbers of registered learners, its completion and achievement rates have been much lower than those of other AVAs. QAA asked the AVA to explain these extremely low rates, as the degree of discrepancy with other AVAs' data appeared too great to be accounted for solely by regional differences in levels of actual student achievement.

52 In response to QAA's enquiries, OCNW commissioned a piece of independent research in 2003. The project raised providers' awareness of issues of retention and achievement, and has served as the basis for worthwhile discussion at the Access Co-ordinators' Committee and conference. However, while this process enabled providers to explore and reflect on some of the reasons for actual non-completion (which appeared to be more significant than any real weaknesses in achievement), it did not fully explain the very low completion and achievement rates.

53 Further work was undertaken by the AVA on the 2003-04 data, resulting in a report to the QSC in November 2005. This explored the impact of factors relating to data recording which may have skewed achievement rates. The report identified a number of factors, including a 'common type of error' in some centres which involved an 'inability to distinguish in centre records between learners registered on full Access awards and those registered on individual subject awards' (see paragraph 57, below). The AVA noted in its 2004-05 annual report to QAA, commenting on one centre where this had been the cause of the problem, that 'there might be other centres which have submitted registration data which might have inflated artificially the aggregated number of learners registered, thereby affecting the overall achievement rate'. The AVA reports that other factors include inconsistency in guidance provided by local Learning and Skills Councils and in providers' responses to that guidance.

54 The AVA has now supplied fuller and clearer advice to providers (both to coordinators and Management Information Systems staff) which is consistent with QAA's guidance to AVAs, as well as setting targets for improvement of overall and individual provider achievement. Providers have been required to undertake individual critical self-assessments, reporting on retention and achievement, and those with achievement rates more than 5 per cent below benchmark figures have been asked to identify reasons for this, with reports being taken to the QSC. As a result of the AVA's work in this area,

the number of recorded registered learners fell by approximately 50 per cent in 2004-05, and the achievement rate improved to 32 per cent. The AVA is aware that this remains relatively low and aims for year-on-year improvement, and is taking further action to achieve this. Since submitting the 2004-05 data to QAA, OCNW has undertaken a further detailed process of enquiry and verification of individual providers' data and has satisfied itself that, had the data been properly recorded and reported, the achievement rate would have been in the region of 52 per cent. Thus, while the AVA's strategic plan gives a relatively modest target of a 10 per cent improvement rate in achievement rates for 2005-06, it is likely that this target will be exceeded and, in its 2006 annual report, OCNW should be able to report an achievement rate which is in line with national AVA averages.

55 OCNW has taken a robust and diligent approach to rectifying previous deficiencies and to obtaining accurate and timely data from its providers to satisfy QAA reporting requirements. OCNW's own data system, which had also contributed to the AVA's difficulties in this area, is now fit for purpose and able to provide the required information. Most importantly, there is a clear understanding by the organisation and its officers of the data issues involved, allied to a determination to produce accurate data. The review team was satisfied that, while there remain individual providers who apparently continue to have some difficulty in reporting accurately against the required data categories, the AVA is clear about what is required and is taking firm action to provide the requested data in its report to QAA.

Principle 3

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

56 A provider must satisfactorily complete OCNW's membership application to be eligible to deliver Access to HE provision recognised by OCNW.

57 The AVA's principal model for Access to HE consists of a common programme structure, based on 12 Access to HE pathways defined in broad curriculum areas. Individual programmes are determined at provider level, and centres register the pathways they intend to deliver each year, selecting from a large bank of individually approved 'subject awards' at level 2 and level 3, in accordance with the AVA's standard rules of combination.

58 The AVA also currently approves some programmes which stand outside this model (including the HEFC), but the AVA intends that, with the introduction of its new Access to HE scheme in 2008, all of the AVA's Access to HE provision will conform to the requirements of its single model, as revised in order to be consistent with the new Access to HE credit and qualification specifications.

Programme development and validation

59 OCNW's procedures for programme development and validation are clearly set out in the Access Programmes Handbook. Although the scheme allows for wholly new pathways to be established, this has never occurred, and the most common type of development occurs through the approval of proposals for new subject awards. The AVA noted in its Overview that there had been a 'mushrooming' of subject awards with 'huge numbers' available at both level 2 and 3. The AVA has responded to this situation by reviewing its portfolio and

removing subject awards which had been little used recently. The AVA now intends to conduct this review annually.

60 The process for the approval of a subject award involves obtaining outline approval from the QSC, followed by a full submission to the Access Programmes Panel, a subcommittee of the QSC. The Access Programmes Panel appoints a Recognition Panel to consider the submission, and the Panel then makes a recommendation about approval to the QSC where responsibility for final approval is located. Prior to submission for validation, level 3 subject awards must be circulated for comment to personnel with relevant expertise working in HE.

61 The Access Programmes Panel is responsible for considering all submissions for Access to HE programme recognitions, substantial modifications and revalidations, and makes recommendations on all these matters to the QSC. The remit of the Panel also includes more general developmental and quality assurance responsibilities, on which it also reports to the QSC. The roles and responsibilities of members are clearly stated and understood by panel members. Processes and outcomes are clearly recorded, and the decisions of the panel are routinely monitored and reported through to the QSC where necessary.

62 The membership of the Access Programmes Panel must represent an appropriate range of interests, including Access to HE providers, receivers of Access to HE students, and relevant curriculum expertise. The review team noted from the minutes of the Panel that, in practice, the members who actually attended varied between meetings, and sought clarification about how membership was determined. Members of the Panel whom the team met considered that there was a core and a variable element to the membership, and that there would not be meetings of the core membership only, but the team was unable to ascertain with any certainty which members constituted the core, or how the membership of the Panel at each meeting was determined.

63 The review team noted that the minutes of the Access Programmes Panel meetings included recorded meetings of separate Recognition Panels for different subject awards, each with a membership which varied from that of the main Access Programme Panel. The terms of reference of the Access Programmes Panel includes details about the membership of Recognition Panels, indicating substantial overlap with the Access Programmes Panel, although it was not clear to the team how the membership of the two groups was related formally. Representatives from the Access Programme Panel explained to the team that a Recognition Panel is, in essence, the Access Programmes Panel with the addition of the proposer (in attendance) and any required subject specialists.

64 The review team considers that a variable membership of Panels which consider different Access to HE programme pathways is appropriate, particularly in order to ensure relevant subject expertise and to exclude the proposer in each case. The team also considers that a core membership of the Panel to consider general developmental issues is necessary, particularly in order to ensure consistency in approach from one meeting to the next. The team recommends that OCNW clarifies the membership of the Access Programmes Panel, and clarifies, in particular:

- whether there is a core membership and, if so, which members comprise the core
- the procedures for determining the actual members of the Panel and their term of office
- the membership and terms of reference of a Recognition Panel and its relationship to the Access Programmes Panel.

Access to HE credit and qualification specification development

65 Most of the Access Programmes Panel's recent activity relates to the development of a revised Access to HE programme model to meet the requirements of the new Access to HE Diploma and credit specifications. The development process is being overseen by the

QSC, which has overall responsibility for the development and implementation of OCNW's new scheme.

66 OCNW's approach to this work has been to develop a common programme model, with appropriately revised procedures, for adoption by all providers in September 2008. Prior to that, the AVA will continue with its current scheme, although revalidation of provision has been suspended to allow all programmes to be validated under the new scheme.

67 The AVA's approved implementation plan provides clear targets, and progress against targets has been satisfactory. The evidence available to the review team indicated that the structures and procedures needed to support the introduction of the new Access to HE Diploma would be fully implemented by the target date of September 2008. The revised scheme will be supported by recently modified documentation for programme development and validation. In the review team's judgement, this documentation fully supports the implementation of the Access to HE credit and qualification specifications.

Development of Access to HE

68 OCNW provides a range of development activities to which all provider centres are invited, and all centres are made aware of their obligations to participate in certain activities (for example, the termly Access Co-ordinators' Committee meetings). These activities address the requirements of the licensing criteria with respect to enhancement, sharing good practice and curriculum development.

69 However, the licensing criteria now also require that an AVA should be 'a focus for the promotion and development of Access to HE within its government region or regions' and, in particular, that it should provide 'leadership in the promotion of Access to HE at local and regional levels...' (licensing criterion 3.8). This criterion adds a new focus to AVAs' responsibilities and activities, requiring AVAs to seek stronger links with regional developments, and engage with broader strategic and policy agendas, as they are played out at regional and local level.

70 In the introduction to its strategic plan, OCNW notes that, although it was originally established to serve the needs of its members in the North West, its membership now 'extends throughout the North East, Yorkshire and London area'. It goes on to state that 'In these areas OCNW will contribute to local agendas in relation to Access and we will continue to network with all stakeholders in the region to identify and meet regional needs'. The plan includes some targets relating to 'partnership' which require it either to 'continue to work with' or 'develop' working relationships with various bodies, although the named organisations are predominantly based in the North West, or have a broad national remit. Evidence available to the review team indicated that, currently, the AVA has not made substantial progress in this area. The team noted the AVA's positive response to a request to develop provision related to nuclear commissioning in the North West. The team also noted that OCNW had some interaction with the Lancashire Learning and Skills Council and the Lancashire Aimhigher steering group; and that the work of the HEFCC provides for some engagement in initiatives in the North East. However, there is little or no evidence of similar strategic engagement or activity by OCNW itself in the other regions in which it operates, for example, other parts of the North West region, parts of Yorkshire and London and the South East.

71 Inevitably, an AVA's capacity to engage in strategic development activity is limited by the resources available, and the potential impact of an AVA's activity will be dissipated when finite resources are distributed more thinly. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that OCNW is more fully engaged in activities in the North West than elsewhere. It is also, perhaps, both economically and strategically sensible for it to consolidate its efforts in this region, rather than in other regions in which it recognises small amounts of Access to HE provision. The review team considered that the AVA's current approach to developing its AVA operation presents it with particular difficulties in meeting the requirements of the new licensing criteria.

The extension of Access to HE validating services in regions in which it otherwise has limited contact (and for which it presents no strategic rationale), is not matched by an equal engagement in development activity which would allow it to act as a focus for development of Access to HE in those regions.

72 The review team concluded that the level of engagement with regional development agendas and initiatives was generally weak outside the North West, and some parts of the North East through its engagement with HEFCC. In order to meet the requirements of the licensing criteria, and deploy its resources effectively, it should therefore limit and define the region(s) in which it has the capacity to engage fully and purposefully, and consider how it can provide effective leadership for the development of Access to HE within the area it specifies.

73 It is therefore a condition of licence that the AVA reviews its strategy for Access to HE and produces a revised strategy, for inclusion within the next iteration of the OCNW strategic plan, which includes specific corporate targets for engagement with appropriate agencies in each of the regions in which it intends to remain active as an AVA, to enable it to meet its responsibilities to act as a focus for development of Access to HE.

Principle 4

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

74 The AVA licensing criteria require that AVAs have established a system of moderation to assure the 'quality, comparability and fitness for purpose of Access to HE programmes', and the 'consistency and sufficiency of standards of student achievement'.

75 OCNW's moderation model comprises moderation boards for each level 3 subject award, held three times a year at the AVA's offices, which are attended by subject

moderators and the tutors from centres delivering the particular subject. The agenda for the autumn moderation board includes syllabus matters, moderation arrangements (including sampling of coursework) and examination procedures. The main purpose of the second moderation board is to set and agree the final examination paper and to standardise coursework. The third moderation board is held towards the end of the academic year and is a 'first tier' awarding board, with the Awards Board (see paragraph 87, below) providing a second, final tier of the awards process. Level 2 subject awards are moderated through visits to individual centres, which are carried out twice a year.

76 Moderators are issued with a comprehensive Moderators' Information File which provides detailed information on matters including the role of the moderator and of moderation and awards boards, level descriptors, sampling procedures, and OCNW's generic marking scheme. The file is updated annually, with modifications sent directly to moderators through the year. There is a comprehensive and mandatory training programme for new moderators and full consideration is given to the provision of subject expertise; the majority of level 3 moderators are drawn from northern HEIs.

77 The sampling procedures specified for level 3 and level 2 subjects are detailed and include clear requirements defining the range of material to be moderated. OCNW has a set sampling model which takes in coursework, projects and examination scripts at specified stages through the year. The review team noted that moderators sampled tapes of oral assessments and considered this to be an example of good practice. OCNW has guidelines for the volume of work to be taken on by an individual moderator which state that a moderator should not cover the work of more than 80 students or student work from more than eight institutions. Moderators complete moderation board minutes pro forma after moderation board meetings and an end of year report which, together with Standards Moderation Visit Report Forms, informs the

Chief Moderator's Report and the Members' Annual Report. The audit trails conducted by the team (see paragraphs 89-100, below) provided an opportunity to view these procedures in practice, on the basis of which the team concluded that they were effective in assuring the quality of OCNW Access to HE awards and their enhancement.

78 The review team was informed that OCNW maintained a 'bank' of potential moderators, often individuals who had worked for the AVA in another capacity, had volunteered, or who had been approached informally. Moderator CVs were scrutinised by the Chief Moderator and Chair of QSC, but the QSC was not otherwise involved in moderator appointments. The team formed the view that the appointment process would benefit from greater transparency and formality, and that advertisement of moderator posts would be desirable, with QSC having a more central role in moderator appointments as, for example, in the scrutiny of moderator curricula vitae and checking for any potential conflicts of interest.

79 QAA's licensing criteria specify that the period of office of a moderator for any one Access to HE programme, or any one Access to HE provider, should be limited to a period of normally no longer than four years, yet the review team found that OCNW moderator appointments, including those made for the HEFC, frequently exceeded this term by a considerable margin. The team noted that OCNW's particular model for moderation, based on subjects rather than programmes, and not involving visit to centres by moderators, was helpful in maintaining externality and objectivity of judgement. Nonetheless, while the team also recognised that the stability of the moderator team could provide a valuable resource of expertise, it was not convinced that there was any justification for the unlimited appointment of moderators and considered that the four-year term was an appropriate period for a moderator to work with a particular provider. The AVA is therefore required, as a condition of licence, to ensure that four years is the normal maximum period

for a moderator's association with any one provider.

80 OCNW's team of Access to HE moderators is led by a Chief Moderator for Access who is responsible for assuring the quality of the AVA's Access to HE programmes. The Chief Moderator produces an annual report compiled from reports that all moderators are required to submit, with commentary and action points. The performance of all moderators is monitored, and moderator contracts are terminated if performance is deemed to be unsatisfactory. The review team concluded that the processes by which quality issues were identified and action points followed up was rigorous and effective.

81 The review team considered the moderation process operated by OCNW to be commendably thorough, and noted the exceptional commitment of its moderators who often worked beyond their basic remit for ensuring quality and standards in, for example, liaising with Access coordinators and mentoring new tutors in the moderation process. In particular, the team found the processes in place to achieve standardisation in subjects across a range of centres to be a commendable example of good practice.

Monitoring

82 OCNW maintains an Inspection Team, currently four strong, the main role of which is to conduct quality audits at AVA centres to ensure that they are compliant with its quality assurance processes. The Overview claimed that the work of this team had 'proved to be an invaluable tool for assessing the effectiveness of changes which have been introduced into OCNW's quality assurance systems over the years' and that the 'centre quality audit programme has provided meaningful inspection which is well received by centres'.

83 The inspectors' role is essentially concerned with processes, rather than standards, working to a brief determined annually by the QSC which the Inspectorate can modify. Centres are inspected over a five-year cycle and the rolling

programme allows six to seven centres to be inspected each year; the cycle was varied as circumstances warranted as in, for example, the case of the appointment of a new college principal. Most recently the Inspectorate was commissioned to verify the accuracy of providers' literature as part of their cycle of activities. It is anticipated that this will become a routine part of its activities so that the AVA can receive periodic reports on providers' promotional literature on a cyclical basis. Inspectorate reports are sent to the Chief Executive Officer and the Chief Moderator who deal with any issues which need immediate action; the review team was given an example of college principals being sometimes unwilling to pay for part-time staff to attend standard setting meetings which are an integral part of the OCNW's quality assurance process.

84 The remit for 2004-05 was to 'inspect those processes which contribute to the quality assurance of OCNW provision and provide feed back to appropriate OCNW committees or management groups'. In the course of 2004-05, the OCNW Inspectorate undertook six inspections of member institutions and also undertook a review of the new 'reasonable adjustments procedures' for learners and an inspection of level 3 examination practices.

85 On the basis of their meetings and reading, the review team concluded that the Overview claims as to the value of OCNW's inspection system were well founded and that the inspection team made a valuable contribution to the AVA's overall quality assurance of provision. But the team also formed the view that the process of the appointment of inspectors should be conducted with more transparency and formality. It noted that a new Chief Inspector was due to be appointed before 2008 and expects that this would be by national advertisement.

86 The review team formed the view that, taken together, the report of the Chief Moderator for Access Programmes, the Chief Inspector's Report and the Deputy Chief Executive's Annual Report on quality assurance issues, with associated follow-up action,

constituted an effective and robust quality assurance mechanism, and provided an effective means by which closure of quality issues could be demonstrated. The audit trails provided valuable additional authentication of the efficacy of the OCNW quality assurance procedures at member institution level.

Access Awards Board

87 OCNW maintains an Access Awards Board, as a subcommittee of QSC, which receives reports from moderation boards across the AVA and approves the award of the Access to HE certificate for all candidates. The Board is chaired by the Chair of the QSC and has a membership constituted annually from a range of constituencies within OCNW (Access Co-ordinators, HE members, QSC, OCNW Board), together with some members ex officio (the Chief Executive, the Chief Moderator for Access, the Chair of QSC). The review team noted from the minutes of the Board that membership varied between meetings and that, on some occasions, the same person was recorded as representing two different constituencies. Members of the QSC reported to the team that, usually, meetings of the Awards Board were held immediately after a meeting of QSC and that an OCNW officer would check in advance their availability to stay on after the QSC to ensure a quorum and the required balance of representation. OCNW officers reported that the QSC decides who attends and that, as members represent roles, they can therefore represent more than one role at the meeting. The team noted that the terms of reference of the Awards Board make no reference to a quorum. The team concluded that the Awards Board is a key component in OCNW's structures and that a single board for all the Access to HE awards, combined with a single Chief Moderator, provides the potential for achieving consistency across the whole AVA. However, the team considers that the terms of reference of the Awards Board lack sufficient clarity and formality in respect of appointment, membership, term of office, quorum and formal notification of meetings.

88 OCNW is therefore required, as a condition of licence, to revise the terms of reference of the Access to HE Awards Board in order to clarify:

- the ex officio members and the appointed members
- the appointing body for appointed members and the procedures for making such appointments
- the term of office of members
- the quorum
- rules preventing any person attending in more than one capacity
- the number of meetings per annum
- the procedure for calling meetings.

Audit trails

89 In the course of the visit, the review team conducted audit trails on seven of the AVA's member institutions. The purpose of these trails was to enable the team to consider the consistency and effectiveness of OCNW's processes at centre level.

90 The providers selected for trails comprised an appropriate sample of Access to HE programmes validated by OCNW. The group consisted of three colleges of varying sizes situated in different subregions of the North West, a large provider in the North East which was also a member of HEFCC, a community education provider, a large FE college which had recently been recruited outside of OCNW's core region, and a school with a large adult and continuing education provision.

91 The review team was presented with audit trail files which included, where available, moderation, monitoring and evaluation documentation for the years 2002-03 to 2005-06. The files included the signed Memorandum of Agreement with OCNW and a completed application for full membership where the membership postdated the introduction of the current pro forma. Documentation also included members' annual reports, centre critical self-assessments for Access to HE which

form part of the scheme revalidation process, results from student evaluation questionnaires, publicity materials and pre-course guidance provided by centres, and inspection reports where appropriate; under the current inspection regime not all centres received an inspection during the review timeframe.

92 The audit trails included three examples of centre approval documentation which comprise the providers' commentary on OCNW's requirements for constitutional compliance. These include assurances on the provision of an adequate standard of teaching and access to learning facilities, the adequacy of support systems, the appointment of an OCNW coordinator with specified roles, support for moderation and assessment, and confirmation of adherence to the AVA's published student charters and quality assurance system.

93 In the examples of the approval process reviewed, the review team formed the view that the procedure was thorough and effective, and left the applicants in no doubt of the requirements and responsibilities of full OCNW membership which the team considered to be appropriately rigorous. However, the team detected some concern in the agreements about attendance at AVA meetings which reinforced the team view that further recruitment of providers outside of the AVA's established region would be likely to inhibit full participation of such members in its activities.

94 Central to OCNW's quality assurance processes are members' annual reports on Access to HE provision. The members' annual reports draw upon the moderators' reports, internal statistical and quality assurance and OCNW inspection reports, where applicable. Institutions are required to report on enrolment trends, provide an update on the report and action plan submitted the previous year with record of actions still to be taken, and identify issues for attention by OCNW. These reports are compiled by the institutional Access Co-ordinator.

95 External moderators' visit report forms comprise a pro forma whereby they verify that Learner Information Record Sheets for the award are clear, complete and accurate, and that the required cover sheets were available and completed by tutors. Additionally, they audit the completeness of centre teams, the training provided, identify good practice, report on standardisation procedures and check action taken and required at the centre. The moderators' June reports identify key issues relating to the support and initial guidance of learners, consistency of the work between pathways and tutor groups, the quality of institutional resource provision and also the adequacy of the feedback received by students.

96 The review team found that, although the members' annual reports were completed with varying degrees of detail, in general, OCNW's procedures were fully complied with and action points followed up. Examples included the provision of improved feedback to students and the completion of cover sheets, and there was compelling evidence that all centres took moderators' reports seriously and that these were used for quality enhancement purposes to good effect. The team also confirmed that the two centres audited which were members of HEFCC complied with the OCNW quality assurance procedures.

97 The review team was left in no doubt that where issues were identified at the moderation level which were of such seriousness as to potentially jeopardise confidence in the quality of provision, robust action was taken by OCNW. In their audit of centre documentation, such cases were found to be rare, but in one example (a subcentre of a large College) it was found by the moderator that there were serious deficiencies in the completion of Learner Information Record Sheets and work was repeatedly submitted at the wrong level. This resulted in a visit by OCNW's Chief Moderator and Development Manager, leading to the identification of shortcomings in the provider's systems of internal verification and standardisation and the production of detailed action points. These were subsequently

satisfactorily addressed although the subcentre was disbanded. In another example, the failure of a tutor to provide coursework for moderation resulted in a prompt letter from the OCNW Chief Moderator to the Access Co-ordinator naming the individual concerned and emphasising that the Inspectorate would expect closure in the centre's quality loop at their next visit.

98 The review team also saw the sample centres' student feedback returns and publicity material. The team confirmed that member institutions conducted questionnaires to a standard format and that there was a good response rate: in 2004, for example, 1,198 Access to HE students filled in an evaluation form. Levels of student satisfaction were high and the majority of respondents were satisfied with the quality of their learning experience on the pathways available at the audit sample centres.

99 The review team noted the AVA's use of the centre self-assessment process and the involvement of its inspectors in monitoring providers' promotional literature (see paragraph 83, above). However, the use of publicity material to promote the AVA's Access to HE courses and the amount of prior and induction guidance given to Access to HE learners by OCNW providers, as evidenced by the audit trails, is currently variable. As one aspect of the AVA's implementation plan for the Access to HE Diploma, the AVA intends to produce some centrally devised marketing materials from 2008, and this will, no doubt, go some way to address this. Nonetheless, the team recommends that the AVA reviews the examples of publicity material it has received and considers whether greater standardisation would be beneficial in this area.

100 The audit trails confirmed the impression that the review team had formed of a quality assurance framework operated by OCNW that was responsive to its providers' needs while effective in assuring standards across a wide range of member institutions. The trails also supported the view that the team formed of a moderation process that was valued by the AVA providers with favourable comment about the

good working of communication and moderation and the prompt reply to queries summarised in the comment of one member that it was doubted 'if a more user-friendly awarding body could be found'.

Conclusions

101 OCNW has made significant progress in the period since the last review, both in terms of business growth and in relation to the maturity and robustness of its quality assurance systems. It monitors provision through a variety of mechanisms which, taken together, ensures a comprehensive and secure system for quality management which is appropriate to its position as an awarding body.

102 The AVA's work is supported throughout by an efficient administration, and is characterised by thorough and well-documented operational procedures in all areas associated with the AVA's management and quality assurance of Access to HE provision. In addition, the difficulties it previously experienced in producing accurate data to meet QAA's requirements appear to have been resolved, as the problem has been thoroughly investigated and the nature of any remaining difficulties fully understood and, in the main, rectified. In the future, OCNW is likely to be able to make data returns which are fully in line with QAA's expectations.

103 The recently revised Constitution and Memorandum of Agreement has usefully clarified the relationship between OCNW and the University of Lancaster, making clear where responsibility lies for the governance and management of the AVA's affairs. The new agreement maintains the relationship between the University and the AVA in a way which brings benefits to each party, while maintaining the AVA's independence in all critical respects. There remain a number of other matters relating to the membership of the AVA's Board and committees which would benefit from fuller definition. The details of membership, representation and quoracy are not always sufficiently clearly delineated to assure the transparency and consistent operation of the

AVA's governance and deliberative structures. Some of these uncertainties about membership relate particularly to OCNW's relationship with the Higher Education Foundation Course Consortium, and this will need to be clarified.

104 OCNW has responded well to the challenges of the new Access to HE credit and qualification specifications. It has undertaken the necessary planning activities and early stages of development with a realistic awareness of the nature and scale of developments and the implications for revisions which will be required across many parts of its operation.

105 OCNW has certain strengths in its established procedures for curriculum development for Access to HE, but it still has to meet the challenge of revisions to the licensing criteria which relate to strategic development. It is alert to some weaknesses in its promotional activity and is taking action to address these, but it has not yet confronted the broader implications of the new responsibilities for providing leadership and a focus for regional development for Access to HE. This remains a major area to be addressed by the AVA which will require some reconsideration of its strategic approach to Access to HE. While it is not constrained by the terms of its AVA licence to operate only in one Government region, it will need to consider whether, in order to meet the requirements of the licensing criteria in full, it might more usefully dedicate resource in the areas with which it is most familiar and where it already has established networks of providers, HEIs and external agencies, rather than dilute this activity by attempting to act as an AVA across a larger number of more geographically distant regions.

106 With a greater sense of focus and engagement with other initiatives for regional development, OCNW is more likely to be able to support providers and HEIs to respond to the identified and diverse needs of disadvantaged adults and thereby provide more possibilities for adults to benefit from its Access to HE scheme and progress successfully to HE.

Commendations

107 The AVA is commended for:

- the thoroughness of its moderation process, including the contribution made by the Chief Moderator's report and the standardisation processes involved in subject level moderation (paragraph 81)
- the value added to the assurance of the quality of Access to HE provision by its inspectorate system (paragraph 85).

The AVA licence

Review outcome

108 The Open College of the North West is awarded a **conditional** renewal of its AVA licence, with conditions to be met by the dates specified below.

Conditions

109 OCNW's AVA licence is renewed on condition that the AVA:

- i reviews and revises the appendix to the Constitution (Board and committee election procedures) to ensure that no single organisation or institution holds a constitutionally preferred status through entitlement to greater representation than any other on its Board or major committees (paragraph 38)
- ii reviews its strategy for Access to HE and produces a revised strategy, for inclusion within the next iteration of the OCNW strategic plan, which includes specific corporate targets for engagement with appropriate agencies in each of the regions in which it intends to remain active as an AVA, to enable it to meet its responsibilities to act as a focus for development of Access to HE (paragraphs 72 and 73)
- iii ensures that four years is the normal maximum period for a moderator's association with any one provider (paragraph 79)

iv revises the terms of reference of the Access to HE Awards Board in order to clarify:

- the ex officio members and the appointed members
- the appointing body for appointed members and the procedures for making such appointments
- the term of office of members
- the quorum
- rules preventing any person attending in more than one capacity
- the number of meetings per annum
- the procedure for calling meetings (paragraph 88).

Conditions i, ii and iv to be met by 1 December 2006.

Condition iii to be met in full by 1 September 2007, with a plan for meeting the condition to be submitted by 1 December 2006.

Recommendations to the AVA

110 The review team recommends that the AVA:

- i reviews the formal requirements for membership of its Board and committees and clarifies, in particular:
 - the size of the Board and, if it decides that the Board should have a smaller membership, revises its quorum to assure an appropriate range of representatives at meetings (paragraph 26)
 - the restrictions on maximum tenure of any one member (paragraph 27)
 - procedures for the appointment or election to the QSC (paragraph 29)
 - more detailed terms of reference for the Access Co-ordinators' Committee, and considers whether it might benefit from the inclusion of HE representatives in its membership (paragraph 31)
 - how the Access Programmes Panel is constituted, to include a core or permanent membership (paragraph 64)

- ii clarifies within the Constitution that responsibility for the final formal approval of the annual AVA report to QAA rests with the Board (paragraph 30)
- iii considers how a more developed research function might assist its promotion and development of Access to HE (paragraph 44)
- iv amends the terms of reference of the QSC to include an explicit role in the appointment and review of moderators and termination of moderator contracts (paragraph 78)
- v reviews the examples of publicity material it has received and considers whether greater standardisation might be beneficial and, if so, how this might be achieved (paragraph 99).

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:

- vi 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
- vii to identify and report on:
 - strengths and good practice in procedures and operations
 - areas which would benefit from further development
 - areas requiring attention.

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