

OCN (TROCN)

FEBRUARY 2002

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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 (HE) 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 Open College Network (TROCN) (OCN (TROCN)) undertaken by QAA. The Agency is grateful to OCN (TROCN) 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 representatives from OCN (TROCN) 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 OCN (TROCN) 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 OCN (TROCN) to finalise the programme and other arrangements for the review visit.

6 The review visit took place on 18 and 19 February 2003. The visit to OCN (TROCN) consisted principally of meetings with representatives of OCN (TROCN), including members of the Board of Trustees, Quality Sub-Committee and AVA Sub-Committee; coordinators for Access to HE programmes; moderators for Access to HE programmes; representatives from higher education; and former Access students now studying in HE.

7 The review team consisted of Dr Pete Johnston, formerly of the University of Essex, and Ms Jill Ward, Assistant Dean, School of Access and Further Education, University of Derby. The review was coordinated for QAA by Ms Kath Dentith, Assistant Director (Access).

The AVA context

8 The AVA was granted a licence in 1996 when the Tees-Wear Access Federation disbanded with transfer of authority (in part) to the Teesside Region Open College Network (TROCN). In 1998, a neighbouring OCN, County Durham and Wearside, ceased operations and TROCN acquired responsibility for accreditation and quality assurance in that region. In particular, with this extension of the area of its geographical operation, TROCN acquired responsibility for some additional Access to HE provision. In 1999, the network merged with OCN Cumbria and South West Scotland, and, after consultation with the National Open College Network (NOCN), adopted the title of The Regional Open College Network for the North (TROCN). In 2000, TROCN applied for and gained a change in its licensing agreement with NOCN. This licensing process included the reconsideration of all OCN names with the aim that names should reflect relevant geographical regions. In consequence, the organisation

adopted the title 'Open College Network (TROCN)' with the strap line 'serving the Tees Valley, County Durham, Wearside and Cumbria regions'. The acronym 'TROCN' was retained in the organisation's title as a known brand, although the letters no longer represented initials relating to separate elements of a fuller title.

9 The organisation was incorporated as a private company limited by guarantee in 2000 and achieved registered charity status in June 2001.

10 In 2001, a neighbouring organisation lost its AVA licence. In consequence, four colleges in the Tyneside region approached OCN (TROCN) seeking QAA recognition for some of their Access provision. Following informal discussion between OCN (TROCN) and QAA this was pursued and OCN (TROCN) initially validated five programmes (for one year in the first instance) in August and September 2001.

11 Access provision validated by OCN (TROCN) currently comprises a total of 30 programmes, delivered by a total of 18 members. These cover a range of types from Access to specific subject, to large multi-pathway programmes.

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

| | |
|---|-------|
| 12 Providers offering Access to HE programmes | 18 |
| Access programmes available | 30 |
| Access programmes running | 24 |
| Access learner registrations | 1,423 |
| Access to HE certificates awarded | 748 |

13 Over the last five years, there has been an increase in numbers of providers (from 13 to 18), recognised programmes (from 18 to 30), registered learners (from 821 to 1,423) and Access certificates awarded (from 510 [in 1999] to 748 in 2002). However, most of the recent increase can be accounted for by the recognition of the Tyneside colleges' provision in 2001. Completion figures are difficult to calculate because the AVA has not provided data to QAA for withdrawals from programmes.

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.

14 OCN (TROCN) is a company limited by guarantee, and it operates as an independent organisation and consortium of members. The company's *Articles of*

Association specify that its membership 'shall comprise Institutions and Organisations which have an interest in widening access to education by developing or using the range of learning programmes accredited by the Charity and which accept its aims and objectives'.

15 Its membership includes institutions providing Access programmes and higher education institutions (HEIs). Currently, OCN (TROCN) has three members in the HE sector: the University of Durham, Queen's Campus, Stockton; the University of Sunderland; and the University of Teesside.

16 From the total number of 75 full members entitled to the full range of OCN (TROCN) services, 14 are currently delivering Access to HE programmes validated by OCN (TROCN). Each of these 14 is in the further education (FE) sector. An additional four further education colleges (FECs) use only the OCN (TROCN) AVA accreditation service to deliver Access to HE programmes validated by OCN (TROCN), through their status as 'AVA only' members.

17 This class of membership was specifically devised to meet the needs of those providers who wished to utilise OCN (TROCN) services for the sole purpose of validation of Access to HE provision. The particular impetus for this OCN (TROCN) initiative was the demise of the neighbouring organisation, the Tyne and Border Counties Access Partnership. The 'AVA membership only' class meets the needs of Tyneside colleges in the context that these colleges are members of the North East Open College Network (NEOCN), which does not hold an AVA licence; it enables such colleges to continue to use NEOCN's accreditation services for provision other than Access to HE.

18 Formal agreements exist for each of the 'full member' and 'AVA membership' classes and also for a 'user' class. Notes to accompany the AVA membership agreement appropriately specify that the applicant is making 'an application for membership to use the Authorised Validating Agency services only and as such will limit the range of services to which you are entitled'. As regards the contents of the membership agreements ('full' and 'AVA only'), the review team noted the appropriate stipulation of members' responsibilities. The team also noted that members' rights were fully described, with clear distinctions made between the rights of the two categories of membership. The main distinction between full and AVA only membership is that AVA only members do not have right of access to the OCN's unit exchange facility and do not have rights relating to attendance at annual general meetings or election of trustees. They do, however, have the right to nominate representatives from their organisations to serve on 'relevant OCN (TROCN) sub-committees'. The team

further noted the clear and appropriate specification of the process for consideration of membership applications, from initial enquiry through to final approval by the Board of Trustees.

19 The team noted however that the 'AVA only' agreement retains reference to a sub-division of membership into sectoral categories (FE, HE, other, voluntary and local education authority (LEA)). This sub-division is specified in the *Articles*, with the particular purpose to ensure cross-sectoral representation on the Board. Given, as noted above, that AVA only members do not elect members to the Board, this seems redundant and the AVA may wish to consider whether it is necessary to retain these sub-divisions when it comes to review the agreement.

20 The team concluded that OCN (TROCN) met the criteria under Principle 1 in full.

Principle 2

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

21 As a company limited by guarantee, OCN (TROCN)'s governing document is its *Memorandum* and *Articles of Association*.

Council of Members

22 Those members that are full members (see paragraph 16-18, above) meet as a 'Council of Members' once a year for the company's annual general meeting. OCN (TROCN)'s *Articles of Association* have recently been amended to reduce the minimum required number of Council of Members' meetings per annum from two to one. This decision was made in the light of experience of the Extraordinary General Meeting of July 2002, which had failed to reach the required quorum of one quarter of the voting members. The review team noted that the company annual general meeting, held in January 2002, had, however, been quorate, and the necessary business had been conducted, including receipt of OCN (TROCN)'s *Annual Report*, appointment of trustees, receipt of the annual accounts and appointment of auditors.

Board of Trustees

23 The composition of OCN (TROCN)'s governing body, its Board of Trustees, is set out in the *Articles of Association* and is designed to ensure cross-sectoral membership. Of the maximum membership of 11 elected trustees (provision is also made for up to four co-options), three members must come from FECs, one from an HEI, two from LEAs, one from the voluntary sector, and one from a category designated other

'provider (training provider/WEA)'. Procedures for the appointment, retirement and rotation of trustees are provided in the *Articles*. The review team noted the appropriate level of seniority of institutional representatives currently serving as trustees. In particular, three trustees, including the Chair, are principals of FECs.

24 The trustees exercise all the powers of the charity; such powers are extensively and appropriately defined in the *Memorandum of Association*. In particular, these powers include 'support local equal opportunity strategies and engage in initiatives which will widen participation of all learners in the educational system'; 'foster collaboration and partnership arrangements within and between sectors'; 'ensure that accredited learning programmes fulfil their aims and objectives'; 'adhere to procedures for the monitoring and review of recognised and validated courses'; 'monitor learner enrolment, progress and destinations'; 'annually evaluate success in meeting its aims and objectives'; 'employ paid or unpaid agents, advisers or staff', and 'foster and undertake research and development into any aspect of the objects'. The *Articles* further specify that, in addition to the powers expressly conferred upon them, trustees have specific powers including entering into contracts, financial authority and appointment of sub-committees. In addition to the statements within the *Memorandum* and *Articles*, a summary expression of duties is provided in a separate remit for the Board of Trustees, which includes a responsibility for 'ensuring that all external licence (ie NOCN, QAA, IiP) requirements are met'. The review team noted that, while the Board's purpose related to 'the mission of the company' and 'oversight of its activities', the Board held no explicit responsibility relating to the organisation's strategy.

25 The review team noted the evidence provided in the minutes of the Board of a systematic development of company processes and procedures. The team further noted evidence of a reflective self-assessment process, in particular as regards the organisation's structure of committees.

Committee structure

26 The *Account* (dated December 2002) records that (in accordance with its founding articles) the Board is supported by a structure of four committees, namely the Audit Sub-Committee, Remuneration Sub-Committee, Quality Sub-Committee and AVA Sub-Committee. Each sub-committee is chaired by a trustee who reports to the Board of Trustees through a standing agenda item. The review team took particular note of the further statement in the *Account* that 'this structure is currently under review', and noted a number of recent changes, or proposals for change, to the committee structure. These changes are discussed below.

Audit Sub-Committee

27 In discharging its responsibilities, the Board of Trustees has been supported by the Audit Sub-Committee. The Audit Sub-Committee's remit appropriately expresses objectives as they relate to the declared purpose to be 'responsible for ensuring that OCN (TROCN) fulfils all its obligations under the Companies Act'. These objectives focus on monitoring, assessing and reporting on the effectiveness of OCN (TROCN)'s financial systems and controls. The effective working of the Audit Sub-Committee can be seen in the minutes of the Board. These minutes also record a report from the Audit Sub-Committee, in discussing its own remit, that it had been agreed that it had 'been undertaking, on the instruction of the Board, work which was outside the remit of such committees. It has therefore been agreed to recommend to the Board that this is reviewed and that a Finance and General Purposes Committee would best meet the needs of the Network'. As a result, in November 2002, the Board agreed 'the replacement of the Audit Sub-Committee with the Finance and General Purpose(s) Committee with immediate effect'. The Finance and General Purposes Committee's purpose specifies its responsibility for 'giving initial consideration to strategies and policies relating to: Finance; Others, ie Human Resources, Accommodation and Management Information Systems'. The team noted the appropriateness of the detailed list of duties under the finance heading and also the appropriateness of membership and quorum.

28 Consistent with the evidence from the above of a process of self-assessment and strengthening of structures as regards financial and related responsibilities, the Board had developed particular procedures. The Board receives a financial report and a risk analysis report as a standing agenda item.

Remuneration Sub-Committee

29 The Remuneration Sub-Committee exists 'to determine the framework for pay and conditions of service of all staff'. The membership appropriately consists of the Chair of the Board, one other nominated trustee and an external employment consultant employed by OCN (TROCN). Appropriate to its purpose, the committee is convened once per year.

Quality Sub-Committee

30 Following the incorporation of OCN (TROCN), a quality sub-committee was established. A Quality Committee had existed previously, which had responsibilities relating to all OCN (TROCN) provision including Access to HE. With the establishment of the Quality Sub-Committee, the Quality Committee relinquished its Access responsibilities. This is made explicit in the Quality Sub-Committee's purpose 'to

ensure that all internal and external quality improvement requirements are met by the organisation and in relation to OCN provision excluding AVA licence requirements'. The review team noted evidence from minutes and from discussion with committee members that, although committee business had been largely appropriate to the Sub-Committee's remit, where OCN and AVA processes were integrated, some of the Sub-Committee's work inevitably had a potential impact on the organisation's Access work. The Sub-Committee had considered, for example, the OCN's developments in programme recognition, annual reviews and the moderation project. The team further noted that, in practice, there had been some overlap with the workings of the AVA Sub-Committee.

31 The emphasis in the Quality Sub-Committee's specified purpose, given above, on quality improvement is maintained in the detailed remit, which specifies that the Quality Sub-Committee 'acts with delegated authority from the Board of Trustees by ensuring that all member organisations operate effective quality improvement requirements in relation to OCN provision'. The same emphasis is also evident in the Sub-Committee's detailed objectives. The Sub-Committee's minutes and discussions with the Sub-Committee suggested that the Sub-Committee's interpretation of its remit gave a disproportionate emphasis to the improvement of quality systems, rather than on the improvement of the quality of provision which the systems are intended to assure. While monitoring of the proper application of the systems should provide evidence of the essential security of the quality of the provision, the approach adopted does not require or encourage detailed consideration or critical reflection on the outcomes of procedures. Although the AVA's officers have some responsibilities in following through outcomes, the organisation's committees have not had a significant role in reviewing these outcomes. In consequence, formal opportunities are limited for making decisions relating to areas for developing and enhancing the quality of provision and the standards of student achievement.

32 Membership of the Quality Sub-Committee comprises a Chair (who is a trustee) and six other members to represent the OCN's full sectoral spread of membership. Additional members with relevant quality assurance expertise may be co-opted. The membership in 2001-02 (with one seat unfilled) consisted of 13 members, including seven co-opted members. The Quality Sub-Committee is required to meet normally four times per year with a quorum for decision-making set at four members plus the Chair.

33 The effective working of the Quality Sub-Committee has been undermined by poor attendance. Since its establishment (where the predecessor Quality

Committee held its last meeting on 12 December 2000), only three quorate meetings had taken place and, in 2002, only one out of three meetings was quorate. OCN (TROCEN)'s response to this issue is discussed below (see paragraphs 38 - 41).

The AVA Sub-Committee

34 This sub-committee, which developed from a previous Access Task Group, held its first meeting on 21 May 2001. The defined purpose of the Sub-Committee is to act 'with delegated authority from the Board of Trustees on all matters that relate to the operation of OCN (TROCEN) as an Authorised Validating Agency (AVA)'. It reports to the Board through a standing agenda item.

35 The Sub-Committee has a specified membership of eight: the Chair (a trustee); three representatives from organisations that offer OCN (TROCEN) accredited Access provision; one Access tutor representative; and three representatives from member HEIs. In addition, the Sub-Committee may co-opt further members with relevant Access expertise. The *Account* lists a total of 12 members for the year 2001-02, and records that 'membership of the committee includes senior Quality Managers from the HE, FE, Sixth Form and Adult Education sectors'. The Sub-Committee is required to meet 'normally four times per year', with a quorum for decision-making set at four members plus the Chair.

36 The remit specifies that the AVA Sub-Committee is responsible for overseeing the quality assurance of Access to HE provision within the AVA by supporting the development, accreditation, review and evaluation of QAA-recognised Access programmes. The specific responsibilities are given as 'objectives' provided under the categories 'strategic', 'operational' and 'developmental'. The responsibilities listed are wide-ranging and appropriate to its purpose, including advising the Board on strategic aims and objectives relating to AVA activity; developing strategies that enhance and promote Access programmes; chairing of recognition panels by individual sub-committee members; receiving Access panel reports for approval decisions; developing and maintaining standard guidelines to produce a regulatory framework for Access provision within the AVA's region; confirming moderator appointments; reviewing Access moderator and annual review reports; ensuring that the AVA systematically collects reliable data; ensuring that effective collaboration takes place between Access providers and receiving HEIs; promoting opportunities for staff development and networking for Access tutors; ensuring that there are procedures to ensure consistency and standardisation between QAA-recognised programmes; ensuring that Access providers maintain centre quality assurance, and

ensuring the use of data and information to inform practice and development.

37 The review team noted the appropriateness of this remit. The team further noted evidence from minutes and from discussion with committee members that committee business had been within the scope of its remit. However, the working of the Sub-Committee has been undermined by poor attendance, and, of the three meetings held in 2002, only one was quorate. As a consequence, some important matters requiring decision, in particular approval of validation, were handled through a process of postal communication. More generally, it has not been possible for the Sub-Committee to address the full range of its responsibilities in a sustained manner. The review team considered that the impact of this was greatest in relation to its 'strategic' responsibilities. The *Account* acknowledges this problem faced by OCN (TROCEN), a problem which is compounded by a similar problem as regards the working of the Quality Sub-Committee (see paragraph 33, above). Further comment on OCN (TROCEN)'s proposed solution to these problems is given below.

OCN (TROCEN)'s response to quoracy issues

38 The problems of quoracy noted above (paragraphs 33 and 37) have been discussed by the Board of Trustees at the September 2002 meeting in relation to the Quality Sub-Committee, and at the November 2002 meeting in relation to both sub-committees. At this second meeting, following a report from the Chair of the AVA Sub-Committee that 'quoracy issues had meant that much of the decision making process had been carried out by "postal" discussion and it was now necessary to reconsider the sub-committee structure', members of the Board discussed a relevant paper presented by the Chief Executive and agreed 'a joint meeting of the Quality and AVA Sub-Committee to take place to discuss the issues and bring a proposal to the next meeting of the Board in February 2003'.

39 By the time of the review visit, this joint meeting had taken place, and a proposal to revise the committee structure had been brought forward and approved by the Board at its meeting on 17 February 2003. The revision agreed by the Board replaced the AVA Sub-Committee and Quality Sub-Committee by a single committee, named the Quality Committee, and also established an Access to HE Sub-Committee (AHEASC). The notes to the proposal specify appropriate Chair regulations, membership requirements and quoracy regulations for both groups, with the quorum for both the Quality Committee and the AHEASC being 'Chair (or) deputy and 3, at least one of whom would be an HEI representative'. Following establishment of the Quality Committee and

the Access to HE Sub-Committee, the remits of each will be developed and approved.

40 The review team heard from OCN (TROCN) representatives that their analysis of the quoracy problems included the perception that the large total membership of each of the AVA Sub-Committee and Quality Sub-Committee had contributed to a 'diffusion of responsibility', and that, further, the committees may have had 'insufficient focus'. In discussion with the team about whether this new structure would resolve the quoracy problem, the Board itself acknowledged that it could not, of course, know for certain that this would be thus resolved but that it intended to monitor effectiveness closely.

41 Given the above, the review team concluded that, while the AVA had a committee structure which could address all of its AVA responsibilities, these were not currently allocated to particular committees. Furthermore, the committee structure which had existed until very recently had specified these responsibilities, but the key committee for AVA and Access matters had not operated fully effectively. The team therefore decided that it should be a condition of renewal of licence that, in order to meet the criteria under Principle 2, OCN (TROCN) provide remits for the Quality Committee and the Access to HE Sub-Committee which clearly specify responsibility for strategic direction, policy development and quality assurance, with reference to Access to HE provision. The AVA should note that the team would regard as necessary the inclusion of all of the AVA Sub-Committee's current responsibilities within the remits of the new committees. As a further condition, OCN (TROCN) must provide evidence of effective working of the Quality Committee and the Access to HE Sub-Committee with particular reference to quoracy, and demonstration that it was fulfilling all aspects of its remit.

Principle 3

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

42 OCN (TROCN)'s legal status as a company limited by guarantee gives it a basis for entering into legally binding agreements. Its status as a charitable company ensures that its financial affairs are formally regulated.

43 OCN (TROCN) occupies premises in Middlesbrough College, a member institution, secured through a formal licence agreement. Additionally OCN (TROCN) utilises space in Carlisle College, another member institution, to provide a base for the relevant development officer (see paragraph 57, below); this is provided through a formal annual agreement.

44 The team found OCN (TROCN) to be aware of, and in a position to meet, its legal and public obligations, and therefore able to meet the criteria under Principle 3 in full.

Principle 4

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

Aims

45 OCN (TROCN)'s mission states its commitment to providing 'a quality accreditation service for the community which will enhance widening participation and lifelong learning'. This is supported by a 'Quality Statement' which states that the OCN is committed to providing a quality service for the community by (inter alia) 'acting as an Authorised Validating Agency for the Quality Assurance Agency'.

46 The *Account* records that the AVA has also developed a 'strategic vision' for the AVA. This vision consists of three elements: 'to locate the Authorised Validating Agency within the overall mission of the organisation'; 'to promote the development of a credit accumulation framework in the region to enable learners, from a wide variety of socio-economic, age, gender and ethnic backgrounds, to experience educational opportunities which build confidence and self-esteem and empowers such learners to realise their potential for progression to undergraduate study and beyond'; and 'further, to do this with integrity, commitment and openness, by building quality systems capable of sustaining such a vision'. The vision is supported by a series of specific strategic aims. These refer to fostering the provision and quality of learning opportunities for adult returners throughout the region to facilitate progression to HE; raising the profile of the AVA as a quality assurance service for progression to HE; creating a regional focus for Access to HE and its part in the widening participation debate; providing a forum for Access to HE practitioners; working with strategic partners to build capacity within the region; and creating 'a local regulatory framework for tracking learners'.

47 The mission and aims were provided within the review documentation, and participants in review meetings also referred, in general terms, to these aims and the supporting values of social inclusion and widening participation that underpinned the organisation's vision and mission.

48 The review team considered the AVA's mission and aims to be congruent with the aims of the Recognition Scheme.

Strategic planning

49 OCN (TROCN)'s commitment to the continuation and development of its Access provision is articulated in the strategic aims referred to above. These are contained within an (undated) document, entitled *Access/AVA Strategy*. However, although the aims are clearly identified in this document, the process for the development and ownership of the strategy was not clear to the review team. The *Account* noted that 'the AVA formalised its aims and main strategic objectives in 2001' and the team was informed that the document was approved by the AVA Sub-Committee in liaison with officers. While the Sub-Committee had had detailed discussions about a wide range of appropriate matters, it was not clear from the Sub-Committee's minutes when this document had been considered.

50 The team heard that strategic planning days, attended by members of the Board and sub-committees, included issues relevant to the AVA and Access provision, and the *Account* notes that 'the Chief Executive is responsible for making proposals to the Board about the mission and strategic direction of the Company'. While both of these mechanisms are undoubtedly useful in developing ideas, it was not clear that either resulted specifically in a formal statement of the AVA's strategic direction or plans. Furthermore, there did not appear to be a process through which the Sub-Committee regularly monitored the achievement of the stated aims.

51 As mentioned previously (see paragraph 36, above), the AVA Sub-Committee is formally responsible for advising and informing the OCN (TROCN) Board about its aims and objectives with respect to its AVA activity. In this respect, the review team noted the Board's action in approving the AVA Sub-Committee's request for funding to support research into learner progression (see paragraph 59, below). It has a particular responsibility to maintain and develop strategies that enhance and promote the status, take up and availability of Access to HE programmes across the region. However, the problems associated with the effective operation of this sub-committee already described have evidently impacted on its ability to fulfil this part of its remit. Given that the process for the Board's oversight of OCN (TROCN)'s AVA licence responsibilities is through the receipt of the Sub-Committee's minutes, the team had some concerns about the Board's ability to take responsibility for the AVA's strategic direction, as articulated in the *Access/AVA Strategy* document.

52 In addition, it was not clear how it was intended that the *Access/AVA Strategy* should articulate with other of the organisation's planning documents, including the action plan which appears in the AVA's

annual report to QAA, and a projected (overall) strategic plan for 2003-06. The 'lack of a three year strategic plan' was identified as a 'major issue' by the Board of Trustees, when discussing areas of risk at its meeting of September 2002, and the *Account* records that 'the strategic plan 2003-2006 was currently in preparation and due to be presented to the ...Strategic Planning meeting in April 2003.'. Although the *Business Plan*, annual report to QAA and *Self Assessment Report* indicate evidence of strategic considerations, there is a lack of articulation between the documents and no overall strategic plan for the development of the AVA and its provision or ownership by any committee. This lack of coherence has resulted in a lack of clarity about priorities. As a consequence, developments and initiatives across the AVA are fragmented and opportunities to take the AVA forward have not been maximised.

53 Providers have limited opportunity to inform the strategic direction of the AVA. The Access Forum, the named vehicle through which practitioners can inform strategy, has not met for at least two years, although a meeting is planned for summer 2003. Consequently, there is reliance on other vehicles, such as a partnership arrangement led by the University of Teesside through which practitioners have the opportunity to meet. Although this is useful, there need to be opportunities for this sort of activity within the AVA itself, rather than a reliance on other agencies that may, or may not, provide this service, depending upon circumstances.

54 In the context of these weaknesses with the operation of the AVA's formal governance and deliberative structures, the main impetus for initiating developments, evaluating impact and reviewing provision comes mainly from officers and relies on their enthusiasm and expertise. Development workers recognise their responsibility for developing strategy for Access to HE and work with HEIs when the opportunity arises to do so. The Director of Curriculum has specific responsibility to lead strategic developments and the Chief Executive has initiated some internal discussion about the AVA and its provision. Although some initiatives have been taken forward, progress tends to be somewhat slow. As an example, while discussions regarding the regional development of GCSE equivalencies started in April 2001, limited progress has been made since. Furthermore, a standardisation project, which could make a valuable contribution to ensuring coherence and consistency, is progressing slowly in relation to Access provision.

55 The review team concluded that, while there is significant expertise and knowledge among AVA staff and members, this is not used as effectively as it could be because of a lack of clear, shared strategic direction and associated specified priorities and targets. The

team judged that the OCN did not currently have effective mechanisms in place for strategic planning or for the subsequent evaluation of agreed strategies in relation to its Access work.

Financial management

56 OCN (TROCN) is a large, well-established, financially secure organisation. In addition to the mechanisms for financial monitoring which are the responsibility of the recently established Financial and General Purposes Committee (see paragraph 27, above), the Chief Executive has full responsibility for ensuring that estimates of income and expenditure and budget reports are submitted for consideration and approval by the Board of Trustees. This, as well as the day-to-day management of budgets and resources, is carried out effectively. The *Business Plan* for 2002-03 is sound, and planning includes realistic forecasts, risk assessment, and strategies for addressing potential threats. The trustees' *Reports and Statement of Accounts, July 2002*, indicated a healthy reserve that would protect the organisation if unforeseen circumstances were to occur.

Staffing and operational procedures

57 The AVA is located in office premises within Middlesbrough College. It also has an office in Carlisle College, Cumbria, where a development officer for that area is located. The activity of the AVA is led by the Chief Executive. AVA curriculum developments are led through the Director of Curriculum, who has direct responsibility for the development and oversight of Access provision. In addition, there are four development workers (including the Cumbria post) and one moderation co-ordinator. Each development officer has a clear role and identified responsibilities. There is considerable experience and enthusiasm within this team and it works effectively within a cohesive framework. Alongside this development team is the administrative team. This is a large team consisting of an additional 11 people, reporting through the two key posts: the Director of Operations and Administration Systems Manager. The Cumbria office does not have its own administrative staff but systems are integrated within the organisation as a whole and all systems and procedures are centrally coordinated through the Middlesbrough office. This arrangement operates effectively and is characterised by regular meetings and good communications.

58 There are effective team-working structures, both within and between teams. The development team and administrative team liaise and work together, and have a clear and shared understanding of systems and processes. Administrative staff deal competently as a team with the procedures for the award of credit for

the Access certificate and understand the technical requirements needed for certification.

59 Administrative staff understand their roles, job descriptions are clear and there is a low turn-over of staff, with the average length of service being three years. There is a highly developed understanding of the AVA's responsibilities in relation to statistical returns made to QAA through its AVA annual report. This is carried out efficiently and effectively through the use of the existing IT system, and there is significant expertise within this field that results in good operating structures. OCN (TROCN) takes seriously its need to track learner progression and has added to the core data collection requirements, by piloting a small research study to further this work. The Board and officers regard this as valuable and a way of providing more reliable information than currently exists. Consequently, there is an extension of this project and the results will inform curriculum development and be shared within the region.

60 When OCN (TROCN) became a company limited by guarantee in 2000, the preparation for this was complex and challenging. This was particularly the case in the areas of human resource and finance. However, partly due to the expertise and knowledge of the administrative staff, the transition was smooth and has resulted in a stable and effective organisation. The review team considered that OCN (TROCN) should be commended for its administrative management and structures.

61 There are clear policies for complaints and grievances and for equal opportunities. Furthermore, an *Equal Opportunities Statement* details how OCN (TROCN) ensures equal opportunities in all aspects of its operation. There is also a clear awareness across the AVA of these policies and the procedures that support them.

Communication with providers

62 Communication between OCN (TROCN) and its members is primarily through the contact of individual development workers with providers and administrative staff concerning operational matters. Contact with HEI representatives is through their engagement as moderators, their consultative role within the development of Access programmes, curriculum content and progression opportunities and attendance at recognition panels. Providers are kept informed about local developments and national policy through the regularly published newsletter, *Curriculum News*. Bulletins are also issued on a regular basis by the Chief Executive, and a recent example of this is the dissemination of information about Recognition Scheme changes relating to admission regulations for 19 and 20 year-olds.

63 However, with the Access Forum being currently inactive (see paragraph 53, above), there is not a mechanism through which members can regularly engage with discussions and debate about policy and practice. Similarly, there is a paucity of development activities led by the AVA to promote discussion and clarity about the implications of national or regional issues, and there is limited opportunity for programme leaders and other practitioners to review their provision critically, within the context of a broader framework and an informed agenda set by the AVA. The review team recommends that the Access Forum, or equivalent, is reinstated as a high profile group that informs the strategic and operational management of the AVA and has membership of both providers of Access courses and receivers of learners.

64 The review team concluded, in relation to Principle 4, that the AVA was able to manage most of its AVA responsibilities and the structure which supported them. However, there is a notable weakness in relation to strategic planning and monitoring, and the team considered it was necessary, as a condition of licence, that the AVA provides a strategic plan which addresses the development needs of the AVA and it systematically evaluates the effectiveness of actions against the strategic plan.

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 and validation

65 Programme development is the responsibility of development workers, who, at initial meetings with prospective providers, discuss the course rationale, aims and objectives, target groups, resources and quality assurance. Access providers are encouraged at the onset of development, to contact HEIs to discuss progression opportunities and curriculum content for specific target groups, and development workers are specifically required to discuss new Access proposals with the Director of Curriculum, who reviews the fitness for purpose and available progression routes for the proposed programme. The review team considered that the currently available document providing advice to development workers about the development of Access to HE programmes could be built on and formalised to good effect.

66 The review team scrutinised documentation used by providers for the submission of Access programmes for validation, including standardised forms used for all OCN and AVA programme and unit submissions.

From January 2003, Access providers have been requested to provide additional formal statements identifying awarding criteria for the Access certificate. This has to be appended to all new submission documents and to existing programme documentation. This separates Access provision from OCN provision and maintained its distinctiveness within the overall OCN (TROCN) structure. The team considered that, with the addition of these new requirements, the process promoted consistency and met the requirements of the Access Recognition Scheme. This could be further clarified by amending the documentation for submission of new Access provision to include awarding criteria specifications as an integrated part of the documentation rather than as an additional requirement. All programmes adhere to the minimum specifications for credits and levels required within an Access programme but there are few other AVA-wide agreements which would contribute to further consistency between programmes, such as the inclusion of common units or GCSE equivalencies.

67 HEIs are further involved as the composition of validation panels states that for Access programmes the panel must have representation from two HE providers. All panels are chaired by a member of the AVA Sub-Committee and recommendations made by the panel are taken to the AVA Sub-Committee for ratification, acting on delegated authority from the Board. The AVA Sub-Committee also has ultimate responsibility for ensuring that conditions are met. Procedures are in place to ensure that conditions set as a condition of validation are met. Systematic checks by development staff, administrative staff, and moderators ensure triangulation of the process.

68 The review team considered that, on the basis of the evidence available to it, the AVA met the criteria under Principle 5.

Principle 6

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

Appointment and training of moderators

69 In June 2000, a thorough review of the moderation process was undertaken and, at this point, all existing moderators' contracts ceased and subsequently new appointments were made. Evidence now indicates that moderators appointed to Access programmes are highly qualified and there is good representation of a range of curriculum areas, as well as a substantial number of moderators employed from both the FE and the HE sector.

70 Training for moderators is considered to be informative and useful as well as offering opportunities to share good practice. Training is well planned and includes relevant changes in policy and curriculum developments. The support of development workers is considered to be excellent and their availability following training, to discuss matters that subsequently arise, is considered to be particularly helpful.

Moderation processes

71 Moderators are issued with comprehensive information about their role and responsibilities and documentation for moderation is clear and well structured. The stages of moderation are well documented and there is a good understanding of them by programme leaders as well as moderators. The documentation is used across the OCN by moderators on all courses because of the organisation's wish to achieve coherence across its OCN and AVA provision. The advantages of shared systems and procedures are apparent, but there is, in places, insufficient differentiation on moderation documentation to identify the particular requirements for Access provision. The review team recommends that there should be a review of this documentation and that it should be amended to take account of the distinctiveness of Access programmes and the responsibilities of the AVA.

72 An initiative to introduce a system of lead and curriculum moderation within large multi-pathway Access programmes is currently underway and is resulting in greater coherence and comparability across programmes. It is an initiative which moderators themselves value and it is also well received and supported by providers. The extension of this pilot across all programmes will further improve confidence in the moderation process. Internal verification within provider institutions is integrated within the moderation process and used as a quality check by moderators. The review team heard that moderators were able to make strong recommendations to providers that this should take place, if it was not happening already, by referring to the clear requirements of the AVA's quality procedures.

73 A standardisation project is currently taking place targeted at specific levels. The first phase of this is looking at level one and two, through OCN IT Units and, at level three Humanities and Social Science Units for Access to HE programmes. The project will identify exemplar material from learners' work on existing programmes. Access Lead Moderators are identifying the level three work from which benchmarks and standardisation exercises will be developed for use in subsequent work with moderators, programme coordinators, internal moderators and tutor assessors.

74 An annual report is produced by the Moderation Coordinator, a member of the development team, which is both informative and evaluative. The primary purpose of this report is to provide information for OCN (TROCN) officers, and it is within this forum that decisions are taken about where it should be received. The AVA Sub-Committee does not routinely receive the Moderator Coordinator's report and is therefore not in a position to make use of this analysis of moderation outcomes to contribute to ideas for development, or influence strategic planning and direction. The review team recommends that the AVA Sub-Committee (or its successor body) uses existing and well-established quality systems and procedures to evaluate quality outcomes critically, as a vehicle for improvement. The AVA should note that this recommendation seeks a focus on the quality and standards of provision, rather than on the quality of the moderation system itself.

The award and issue of Access to HE certificates

75 The procedure for the award of Access certificates relies on moderators signing documentation for the achievement of credit. This documentation is then forwarded to the AVA administrative staff and the process of awarding the Access certificate is one of accumulation of the correct number of credits and levels, by the learner, according to the programme specification. There is no specification that the award of the Access certificate should be confirmed at a final assessment meeting. This process excludes consideration of any personal or extenuating circumstances, so could disadvantage some individuals. The review team considered that, as a condition for the renewal of the AVA licence, the AVA should develop standardised procedures for the conduct of final assessment meetings, which include requirements for membership and moderator representation.

76 The review team concluded that OCN (TROCN) has effective moderation procedures in place and these are working well. With the addition of the requirement to introduce a standard procedure for final assessment meetings, it will be able to meet the licensing criteria 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.

77 Systems and processes that enable the AVA to review and evaluate Access provision are in place. The review team noted that there was a clear understanding of requirements for the submission of Access programmes; an understanding and appropriate

use of the systems for recognition; and clarity regarding the subsequent quality requirements and standards which need to be met for programmes to continue.

78 Providers are encouraged to review their provision and, if it is appropriate, to amend their existing programmes. This involves a thorough procedure, including pre-panels, full panels, and internal quality panels depending upon the scale of amendment. At appropriate stages, development workers, HE advisors and moderators are involved, and this promotes consistency and comparability across the AVA.

79 The quality of Access programmes is reviewed through the moderators' reports and, on the basis of these reports, an annual quality review is compiled for each provider by development workers. Issues to be addressed are then monitored by the moderator and reported on within the next annual quality review. These reviews are also reported within the Moderator Coordinator's annual report and the AVA annual report. At officer level, these processes and procedures are clear and transparent and providers and moderators engage with them.

80 Although the main responsibility for ensuring the quality, standards, and operational safety of the QAA licence is located within the AVA Sub-Committee, the Board and its committees have limited engagement in assessing and addressing the outcomes of these systems.

Development of provision

81 There is a good understanding by officers and the Board of the specific characteristics and needs of the region in relation to high unemployment and other socio-economic factors. This context influences decisions by providers in their development of appropriate provision. Given the financial stability and good local reputation of the AVA, it is in ideal position to lead developments that enhance opportunities for progression to HE for its local communities.

Conclusions

82 OCN (TROCN) holds responsibility for a large proportion of Access to HE provision in the North East; it also has responsibility for a small number of Access to HE programmes in Cumbria. The organisation has, both as an AVA and as an OCN, expanded its geographical reach and range of activities in the last six years. With this growth and related increasing financial security, OCN (TROCN) has been able to develop a strong, experienced staff team who operate according to well-developed and clear systems and procedures, many of which are supported by good quality documentation.

83 The operation integrates the majority of its AVA and non-AVA processes, with most quality assurance procedures devised and described to meet the needs of both of the organisation's licensing bodies. While this integration works satisfactorily for most purposes, and systems are generally effective, there are some areas of detail which suggest that, in the development of procedures, adequate consideration has not always been given to the needs and opportunities that are particular for QAA-recognised Access programmes and certificates. While there are few areas in which this is likely to affect the security of the award, it does affect the AVA's ability to identify particular areas for development and enhancement in this area of its work.

84 The AVA's quality assurance framework involves systematic monitoring by officers of providers' implementation and application of the AVA's procedures. While OCN (TROCN) officers are diligent and thorough in their application of quality assurance procedures, responsibility for oversight of quality assurance lies within the organisation's committee structure. Most AVA responsibilities are delegated by the Board to the AVA Sub-Committee, which, as well as having a detailed and comprehensive remit for Access and AVA matters, is also directly charged with ensuring that OCN (TROCN) fulfils all its obligations under the AVA licence. The current committee structure, which has been in place for two years, has, however, never operated fully effectively, not least because there have been significant problems with attendance at the Quality and AVA Sub-Committees. With several inquorate meetings, the AVA Sub-Committee's ability to meet its responsibilities in full has been limited. So while the structure has the potential to meet the responsibilities associated with the AVA licence, in practice, there has been a major weakness in the AVA's oversight of its Access responsibilities, and the Board's ability to monitor the exercise of its AVA responsibilities is obviously hampered by the absence of regular reporting from committees.

85 The Board has recognised that the operation of certain of its committees has not been effective and has, very recently, approved proposals to make changes to its committee structures to address these problems. The proposals have not yet been fully developed or implemented, and it is therefore not possible to know, at this stage, whether the changes that have been proposed will bring about the desired results in securing the governance of the AVA and the quality assurance of the Access provision for which it has responsibility.

86 In the absence of significant activity by the AVA Sub-Committee in relation to its strategic responsibilities, there is not a clear process for the development and formal approval of Access strategy. In these circumstances, it is unsurprising to find that

the AVA has been somewhat slow to engage with relevant regional and national developments which provide opportunities for the further development of Access. While some worthwhile activities are taking place to improve consistency at programme level, and the AVA has enhanced its own procedures, in general, potential opportunities for the development of Access and the AVA are not sufficiently recognised and are under-exploited at organisational level.

87 OCN (TROCN) is an efficient, officer-led operation which is well regarded as a service provider. It is not currently making an equivalent impact as a consortium of FE and HE members working together to develop opportunities for progression to higher education.

Commendations

88 The AVA is commended for the efficiency and effectiveness of its administrative management and structures.

The AVA licence

Review outcome

The Open College Network (TROCN) is awarded a **conditional** renewal of its AVA licence, with conditions specified below to be met by the date(s) specified.

Conditions

The OCN (TROCN)'s AVA licence will be renewed on condition that it:

- i produces appropriate remits for the Quality Committee and the Access to HE Sub-Committee, or such other new committees as may be determined, which clearly specify responsibility, in relation to Access to HE provision, for strategic direction; policy development; and quality assurance of programmes (paragraph 41);

Condition to be met by 1 October 2003

- ii provides evidence of the effective operation of the new committee structure, which demonstrates that committees are fulfilling all aspects of their remits, as they relate to Access to HE (paragraph 41);

Condition to be met by 1 June 2004

- iii provides a strategic plan which identifies clear priorities for development for Access, and demonstrates the plan's coherence and articulation with other planning documents (paragraph 64);

Condition to be met by 1 October 2003

- iv develops effective monitoring and review procedures which inform strategic and developmental plans (paragraph 64);

Condition to be met by 1 October 2003

- v develops standard requirements and procedures for the conduct of final assessment meetings at which recommendations for the award of Access certificates are made, to include the attendance of lead moderators (or equivalent), to ensure consistency and equity of practice (paragraph 75).

Condition to be met by 1 October 2003

Recommendations to the AVA

89 The review team recommends that the AVA:

- i reinstates the Access Forum, or equivalent body, with a membership of both providers of Access courses and receivers of learners, and ensures that it is able to inform the strategic and operational management of the AVA (paragraph 63);
- ii reviews its moderation documentation and amends it to take account of the distinctiveness of Access programmes and the responsibilities of the AVA (paragraph 71);
- iii includes in the remit of the AVA Sub-Committee (or its successor body) responsibility for using existing quality systems and procedures to evaluate quality outcomes critically, as a vehicle for improvement (paragraph 74).

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
 - 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.

ISBN 1 85824 915 5

© Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2003

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

Tel 01452 557000
Fax 01452 557070
Web www.qaa.ac.uk

Printed by
Linney Print

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a company limited by guarantee