



Access to Higher Education

Open College Network
South West Region

FEBRUARY 2008

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ISBN 978 1 84482 851 7

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786

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Foreword

1 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is responsible to the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills for the recognition of Access to Higher Education (HE) courses. QAA exercises this responsibility through a national network of access validating agencies (AVAs), which are licensed by QAA to recognise individual Access to HE courses, and to award Access to HE qualifications to students. The AVAs are responsible for implementing quality assurance arrangements in relation to the quality of Access to HE provision and the standards of student achievement. QAA has developed a scheme for the licensing and review of AVAs, the principles and processes of which are described in the *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*. The *Recognition Scheme* 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 and periodic review and relicensing. The criteria applied by the ARLC and by review teams operating on the Committee's behalf, in reaching judgements about whether and under what terms an AVA licence should be confirmed or renewed, are provided within the *Recognition Scheme* documentation. These criteria are grouped under the four principles that provide the main section headings of this report.

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

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

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

The review process

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

6 The review visit took place on 26 to 28 February 2008. The visit to OCNSWR consisted principally of meetings with representatives of OCNSWR, including AVA officers; members of the Board, the Higher Education and Access Committee (HEAC); Access to HE coordinators, including representatives from the Common Access Framework (CAF) Development Group; moderators, and other Access to HE stakeholders.

7 The review team consisted of Ms Penny Blackie, Director of Regional Strategy, Foundation Degree Forward; Dr Mark Atlay, Director of Teaching and Learning, University of Bedfordshire; and Mr Alan Smith, Quality and Curriculum Manager, Access to HE, Open College Network Wales. The review was coordinated for QAA by Mr Matthew Cott, Assistant Director.

The AVA context

8 OCNSWR was formed in August 2005 by the merger of two existing open college networks (OCNs)/AVAs: the Western Region Open College Network and the Open College Network of the South West. Each of these organisations had held AVA licences since the early 1990s. During 2005-06, OCNSWR operated as a single OCN but as two AVAs working towards merger.

9 OCNSWR operates across the South West of England covering the counties of Wiltshire, Gloucestershire, Devon, Cornwall, Somerset and Dorset and includes unitary authorities of Bristol, Plymouth, Torbay, Bournemouth and Poole, Bath and North East Somerset, and South Gloucestershire. It also operates in the Channel Islands.

Major developments since the granting of a provisional licence

10 Following a successful licence application, OCNSWR was granted a provisional AVA licence in July 2006, with the following conditions.

- i The action plan for meeting the licensing criteria should be implemented to the timescales indicated.
- ii The Memorandum and Articles of Association should specify the categories of stakeholder representation and the criteria for their appointment or election to the Board.
- iii The Board's and HEAC's remits should signify QAA's requirement that the Board formally approves the annual AVA report to QAA and the overview document required for AVA review.
- iv Either: that section six, Learner Support and Appropriate Resources in the CAF pro forma is amended to bring it into line with the requirements of section seven in the Learning Programme Plan (LPP), or an additional section is introduced into the CAF pro forma which requires this information. This reviewed document should be formally approved by HEAC.
- v The AVA should develop detailed guidance notes to accompany the CAF centre

approval and the LPP pro formas, as well as a checklist for quality reviewers. Each of these should clearly indicate the level of detail required in the provider's approval submission.

- vi The AVA should require that all new Access to HE programmes developed by the CAF Development Group are validated by a group of members which includes both HE and FE representation independent from those involved in the development process. Whether this process operates independently of, or within, HEAC, it should be documented fully as with traditional validation panels.
- vii Guidelines are developed for the revalidation process which identify the various elements of the review process the OCN expects the provider to address. These guidelines should be formally approved by HEAC.
- viii The AVA should develop guidance notes for final assessment boards which include issues to be addressed and a method of confirming that the board has been successfully carried out. These guidance notes should be formally approved by HEAC.

11 All conditions, with the exception of (viii), were confirmed as having been met by the ARLC in January 2007 while subsequent dialogue between QAA and the AVA resulted in confirmation, in November 2007, that the final condition had been met.

12 The licensing report also contained a number of recommendations for the AVA's consideration. These related to the AVA's constitutional and governance structures; monitoring of the Board's delegation of authority to HEAC; membership and quorum of HEAC; and recognition and management of risks related to Access to HE. The team found that the AVA had largely responded to these recommendations and any exceptions are reflected in this report (see paragraphs 19, 21).

13 The major areas of work for OCNSWR since it was granted its provisional licence have been the development of common processes for the new AVA, drawing on practice from the

two previous AVAs; the further development of the CAF; the establishment of the base for the new OCNSWR in two regional offices, Plymouth for registration and awards and Cheltenham for quality assurance. During this period, OCNSWR had also experienced some financial difficulties which resulted in changes to staffing and contracts.

Members and provision

14 In 2006-07 there were 29 approved Access to HE providers, 27 of which were further education colleges (FECs). Recently, Access to HE student numbers in the region have been in decline, falling by 4 per cent in 2005-06 and a further 17 per cent in 2006-07. OCNSWR considered this decline to be largely the result of a change in the Learning and Skills Council's (LSC) funding methodology. Learners come from a variety of backgrounds and increasingly include those in the younger age ranges (in 2006-07, 8 per cent of Access to HE students were aged under 20). The success rate of learners on Access to HE programmes in the region is 53 per cent.

AVA statistics 2006-07

15 The AVA reported the following statistics in its annual report for 2006-07:

Providers offering Access to HE programmes	29
Access to HE programmes available	95
Access to HE programmes running	88
Access to HE learner registrations	2,244
Access to HE certificates awarded	1,208

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

Legal identity and mission

16 OCNSWR is a company limited by guarantee. Its Memorandum and Articles of Association (the Articles) were developed with advice from an established firm of solicitors, formally adopted in 2005 and amended in November 2006. OCNSWR's aims, set out as its Objects, include references to widening participation and improving progression opportunities to higher education. Key features of the Objects in respect of the *Recognition Scheme* cover the advancement of education, widening participation in education and training, the improvement of quality and flexibility of educational provision, improving access to learning, raising standards and achievement and meeting the requirements of QAA.

17 OCNSWR's Board approved the company's mission in March 2006 as:

'OCNSWR supports learning and widens opportunity by recognising achievement through credit based courses and qualifications'.

18 The AVA is a membership organisation and membership is available to all organisations, firms or associations that have an interest in education, training or related activities within the region and have similar purposes to those of the OCN. There is provision in the Articles for an annual general meeting (AGM) but staff informed the review team that currently this is a formal meeting of the Board. There has been one such AGM so far for the new organisation, held in June 2007. The team considered that, since OCNSWR is a membership organisation, the AGM could be an important vehicle for members to play an active strategic role in the organisation. The team recommends that OCNSWR institutes a formal AGM in line with the standard for such meetings.

Governance and committee structure

19 OCNSWR is a fully independent, legally constituted company with a Board to ensure formal accountability. Although the locus of authority rests with the Board, many matters related to Access to HE are devolved to its sole committee, HEAC. Unlike HEAC, the Board has no specific terms of reference but its purpose, membership and function is laid out in various sections of the Articles. The review team formed the view that terms of reference would provide a helpful reference point for Board members. The team recommends that the AVA develops terms of reference for its Board. The Board's constitution requires not fewer than six and not more than 12 directors. The Board must also include at least one representative from each of the following four sectors: HE including organisations which receive Access to HE students, FE or adult learning, voluntary/community and commercial. Directors are usually elected at the AGM and serve for three years with one third being replaced each year. Directors can be re-elected, apparently without limit. In 2006, the licensing team recommended that the AVA set a maximum term of office for individual directors, and the present review team agreed that this recommendation remained valid.

20 At the time of the review, the Board had seven members, including the Chair who is an independent consultant and who informed the review team that she had been Chair of one of the former OCNs, or its predecessors, for a total of 12 years. There are three independent consultants, one of whom joined the Board recently. Three directors are from HE and one from FE. This representation did not appear to meet the requirements of the Board's composition as laid down in the Articles. The team discussed with the Board members the potential for extending the Board to add expertise and skills from other sectors. Board members acknowledged that, as with many other organisations, the OCN was finding it difficult to recruit appropriate directors, a situation exacerbated by the geography of the South West region. The Board had been

considering recruiting new members but chose to wait until present financial difficulties had been resolved. The team was not convinced that OCNSWR saw the expansion of its Board as a priority and considered that expansion of numbers, a membership that meets the requirements of its own Articles and has broader skills and expertise is required to ensure sound governance. It is therefore a condition of licence that the AVA expands the Board's membership in order to meet the categories of stakeholder representation specified in its Memorandum and Articles of Association, and extends its expertise and regional representation.

21 Of the eight meetings held since the Board's inception, two were inquorate and several had almost as many officers in attendance as members. Where discussions dealt with sensitive issues concerning staff or finances, a confidential note replaced the usual minutes. The review team was informed that no decisions were taken at inquorate meetings, with any matters to be decided being circulated by email to Board members before a decision was finalised. To help overcome poor attendance due to geographical challenges, the licensing team had recommended in 2006 that the AVA consider holding some meetings by video conference. The present team concurs with this view and recommends that the AVA develops its strategies to ensure participation in its meetings in ways other than face-to-face.

22 Licensing condition (iii) required the AVA to revise the Board's and HEAC's remit to ensure that the annual AVA report to QAA was formally approved by the Board. The review team was informed that rather than scheduling the Board's meetings so that it could approve the annual report, a subgroup with delegated authority from the Board was formed to deal with the approval, with a full meeting of the Board held after the report had been submitted to QAA. While recognising that this solution may have been a response to those challenges identified already (see previous paragraph), it was not clear to the team why the timing of the Board's meeting had not been amended so that it could

meet the licensing requirements. It is therefore a condition of licence that the AVA schedules its Board meetings to enable the whole Board to approve the annual AVA report to QAA.

23 OCNSWR has one committee, HEAC, to which the Board has delegated authority to deal with most matters related to Access to HE. HEAC reports to the Board through a standing agenda item, although the level of detail within the Board's minutes did not provide evidence of extensive discussion of matters associated with Access to HE. HEAC's terms of reference state that there should be at least two Board members nominated by the Board. Although not stipulated in its terms of reference, the current Chair of HEAC is also a member of the Board. At the time of the review the Chair, however, was the Board's only representative. All provider institutions and receiving higher education institutions (HEIs) are entitled to a place on HEAC and most are represented. Some are nominees, some volunteers and some approached and invited to attend by the AVA. There are currently 21 such members of HEAC and the Director of Access is working to obtain representation from the small number of HEIs and FECs not represented.

24 The terms of reference state that 'HEAC will be responsible to the Board for ensuring that OCNSWR meets all the regulatory requirements of QAA for Access to HE provision' and 'shall be responsible for overseeing all matters relating to the approval, quality assurance and the award of Access to HE qualifications and credit certificates on all QAA recognised Access to HE provision in the South West Region of England'. Underpinning these higher level statements are 16 tasks, for example: 'to receive a summary report of all moderator reports', 'to receive panel reports for all approval panels and reports from the CAF development group', and 'to confirm approval for Access to HE programmes and the appointment of new moderators'. The team formed the view that the language of HEAC's terms of reference, particularly the nature of the actions required of HEAC, did not correspond with its delegated status as the authoritative, decision-making body for Access to HE provision.

25 OCNSWR's Director of Quality and Director of Access have explicit and complementary responsibilities for quality assurance, enhancement and the development of the Access to HE provision in the region. The work of HEAC is also supported by the Access to HE Forums which are held in both the north and the south of the region. Membership of the Forum is open to all providers and receivers in the Access to HE community. All CAF developments are supported and coordinated by the CAF Development Group which reports to HEAC. The CAF Development Group meets at least twice a year and is made up of Access to HE coordinators, OCNSWR staff as well as subject staff from both FE and HE.

Financial and staffing structures

26 OCNSWR operates in accordance with the regulations of the Companies Act. The Articles limit the legal liability to members and their representatives and the OCN holds professional indemnity insurance. A full set of accounts is prepared each year but, under the Companies Act, OCNSWR is exempt from the requirement for audited accounts or a commentary on them. The accounts are scrutinised by external accountants, approved by the Board and submitted to Companies House.

27 In the last year, OCNSWR has experienced considerable financial difficulty, which was reported by the OCN to be largely due to changes to LSC funding, and meant that learner registrations for the 2006-07 year for non-Access provision were significantly lower than had been forecasted. Although this was not entirely unexpected by the Board, and some discussions had taken place about the possible impact, the extent of the loss came as a surprise to the Board in the second year of the merged OCN. A planned restructure contributed to the potential solution. Board members have met with QAA to discuss the possible impact on their future operation and will continue to keep in contact, while monitoring the situation and receiving monthly reports. Board members told the review team that they felt some cautious optimism that a

more stable financial position would be achieved by the summer of 2008.

28 The Chief Executive left the company in October 2007 as part of a planned restructure, and in January 2008 a new Acting Regional Director was appointed from within the OCN. The Board has since engaged the former Chief Executive as an independent financial adviser and as Company Secretary. While noting the potential benefits of the latter arrangement, the review team considered that in maintaining such an arrangement there was potential for a blurring of leadership boundaries within the organisation. The team recommends that, as the Board expands its membership, skills and expertise, it should review its changing requirements for external advice and governance support and consider how those requirements are best met.

Principle 2

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

Strategic planning

29 OCNSWR has a coherent and effective business and strategic planning process. HEAC is involved in discussing the Access to HE Strategy and, once agreed by the Board, in developing and monitoring the associated operational targets. The review team was told that the locus of responsibility for the approval of the Access to HE Strategic Plan is with HEAC and this goes to the Board for final approval. The initial Strategic Plan (2006-07) for the newly merged organisation was developed from outstanding issues from the strategic plans of the two predecessor OCN/AVAs. The subsequent plan (2007-08 onwards) was based on matters outstanding from the initial plan and a position paper produced by AVA officers. The team found this strategic position paper to be thorough and well researched, identifying the local and national drivers that are affecting, or are anticipated to affect, Access to HE in the South West region over the next three years.

30 There is a defined strategic review and planning process required by the Board to enable final papers to come to it for approval by its July meeting each year, thus ensuring that the strategic plan for the subsequent academic year is in place in time to be appropriately delivered. Based on this, an operational and action plan is also developed and progress towards meeting these targets is monitored by HEAC. Input into the strategic plan can be submitted to any HEAC meeting for consideration. The review team heard that there were many opportunities for providers and stakeholders to contribute to the strategic planning process via the sub-regional Access to HE Forum, the regional Access to HE Conference and the CAF development groups. The review team commends the AVA for its coherent and inclusive business and strategic planning process involving the Board, HEAC and AVA officers.

31 In 2006 the licensing team recommended that the AVA reflect Access to HE specific risks in the OCN's formal business analyses and the review team found that this recommendation had been acted upon. Areas of risk together with controls are now identified within the strategic and operational plans, and these are reported on. Similarly, areas of opportunity are also included. It is the intention of the Board that the key performance indicators required from other OCN departmental heads will soon be required of staff responsible for Access to HE.

Self-assessment

32 OCNSWR operates the Vanguard system of self-assessment. This looks at processes and uses process mapping to identify key points within a process in order to eliminate duplication and errors. The Vanguard system is being applied to a range of operations, although due to staff sickness has not yet been applied to all aspects of work and only to a few which relate directly to the processes of the AVA. A report on this topic from the Operations Manager was intended to be presented to the next meeting of HEAC.

33 OCNSWR's governance and constitutional arrangements have already been noted (see above Principle 1). HEAC has 24 members. Discounting the first meeting of HEAC as being atypical of the membership, the review team found that of the remaining three meetings only one member attended all three, seven attended two and 12 attended one. Despite assurances that HEAC members receive all the committee papers and were therefore able to give written input to committee meetings, the team remained concerned that the current level of continuity from one meeting to the next has the potential to limit the quality of HEAC's decision-making and hence the AVA's capacity to meet its licensing responsibilities.

34 Committee minutes seen by the review team varied in their level of detail and the team formed the view that HEAC's minutes would not always inform those not attending of the critical points discussed.

35 Overall, the review team found that the AVA's monitoring of its committee structure's operation and effectiveness is in an early stage of development. It was clear to the team that the way in which the committee structure operates requires attention. It is therefore a condition of licence that the AVA reviews its committee structure to ensure that it can discharge its responsibilities for Access to HE rigorously with clear and formal accountability.

Financial management

36 The OCN maintains appropriate accounts that are checked by accountants. The OCN is currently emerging from a period of substantial budget deficit caused by lower than expected learner enrolment in the summer term of 2007. Although the review team was informed that the effects of changes to LSC funding had been expected, it was not clear whether financial forecasting, reporting and monitoring arrangements had provided adequate and timely information to enable an early response. The Board assured the team that the 2007-08 budget was based on lower projected student registrations and that monthly monitoring and contingency plans were in place.

Staffing and administration

37 The AVA's work with providers and stakeholders is well supported by three fractional 0.6 appointments. Between them they are clearly capable of delivering the requirements of the AVA licence. Responsibility for leadership is clearly with the Director of Access, and day-to-day management of Access to HE work is carried out by two sub-regional development officers, supported by the administration team under the Operations Manager. All providers, moderators and stakeholders who met with the review team spoke highly of the level of support they receive from OCNSWR officers. The team commends the AVA for the commitment, dedication and contribution made by staff in their support of moderators, providers, tutors and other key stakeholders.

38 The new AVA is in the process of documenting its administrative procedures for Access to HE. Progress on this has been delayed due to staff sickness and the introduction of the Vanguard self-assessment system which has been effectively applied to some of the OCN's other processes (see above paragraph 32). The review team was provided with a draft of the administrative procedures and noted some errors relating to the inclusion of level 1 credits in Access to HE awards. It is a condition of licence that the AVA brings to completion its administrative procedures document so that all staff can operate to the same guidelines.

39 OCNSWR uses the 'Opus' system for its data recording and analysis. The Board informed the review team that part of the reason why it had not realised the severity of its financial situation in the summer of 2007 was due to entries to its system being double-counted. Staff explained to the team that reports from Opus were often unreliable but that they had identified the areas that could not be trusted, and that alternative methods of obtaining information were used to compensate for this. If necessary, staff refer back to original paper records for accurate information. The team formed the view that, despite these limitations, the AVA has the

capacity to meet the licensing requirements but recommends that the AVA should explore its requirements for the secure storage, retrieval and analysis of Access to HE related data.

40 OCNSWR has a unit bank accessible via its website. These units have been through a validation process and are reviewed for fitness for purpose according to a rolling programme. Those units from subject areas that undergo rapid change, such as information technology, are reviewed more frequently.

Communication and information

41 Despite the geographical challenges of the region, Board and committee members, providers, stakeholders and moderators spoke highly of the efficient and effective communication which operates between themselves and the AVA. Emails, mobile communications, face-to-face meetings, tutor and moderator handbooks all enable the AVA to ensure awareness of responsibilities, current developments, regulatory matters and management issues. The website was praised as an effective communication tool which had improved considerably and which was being further enhanced. The review team commends the AVA for the proactive and strong communication links that it has fostered with its providers and stakeholders.

42 One of the roles of the moderation team is to monitor the information given to students during their applications and subsequently throughout their courses. The moderators met by the review team told them that all providers were ensuring that learners were well supported with information which related to their enrolment, personal matters such as finance and progression requirements, as well as the curricular information that was essential for their success. Providers are required to send in their promotional material, such as prospectuses, to confirm that the correct QAA logo is being used.

43 OCNSWR has a clear equal opportunities policy which was approved by the Board and is applied to the AVA's work. Similarly there is a grievance and complaints procedure that

relates to Access to HE provision that has been approved by HEAC. This procedure may be used by students to complain to the AVA once the provider's own complaints procedure has been exhausted or if there is a direct complaint about the AVA or its moderators.

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

44 The majority of OCNSWR's Access to HE provision is within the AVA's Common Access Framework (CAF). This framework operates across the region and consists of a common bank of named Access to HE pathways, subject modules and units. The AVA continues to recognise an ever decreasing number of Access to HE programmes that are outside the CAF: these were validated by the two previous AVAs. The review team was told that the AVA intends to work with providers to transfer all or part of their programmes to the CAF by September 2009. The team found the procedures and guidance for development, validation, annual monitoring and revalidation of non-CAF programmes to be appropriate.

Common Access Framework development

45 The newly merged AVA has continued the development of the CAF which originated from one of its predecessor AVAs where the first pathway was offered in September 2004. The Access Tutor Handbook and CAF Guidelines state that 'The CAF is a single comprehensive framework that brings together best practice across the region into a common bank of Access to HE pathways and units'. The AVA's processes for approving/reapproving providers to offer CAF pathways (see paragraph 52) are separate from its processes for the development, validation and revalidation of the CAF pathways themselves. In the context of the

requirements of the new Access to HE Diploma, the AVA's emphasis on further developing the CAF has been more concerned with minor adjustments than major revisions.

Pathway development

46 The AVA currently offers seven CAF pathways in health and social care, computing, creative arts, education, science, sport and combined studies. Work on new pathways or the extension of existing pathways was ongoing at the time of the review visit. The CAF Development Group (see above paragraph 25) has been charged with taking this work forward. The process of developing the CAF has been welcomed by providers and HEIs alike. The review team was told that this process had led to a number of positive gains for providers, including HEIs' increased awareness of Access to HE.

47 In consultation with providers, the AVA has identified or received proposals for the subject pathways to develop as part of the CAF. Development days are set up where subject specialists from providers and HEIs come together to agree the subject content of modules for new pathways. Subsequently, subject specialists are tasked with revising or writing the units which comprise the modules. Credit tariffs and rules of combination required for successful completion of the pathway are agreed at a subsequent stage of the development process. The review team commends the AVA for the collegial way in which FE providers and HE receivers have been brought together in the ongoing development of the Common Access Framework.

Guidance for providers and moderators

48 To support providers and moderators, the AVA has developed a comprehensive handbook relating to its Access to HE programmes, including the CAF, which gives details of the relevant processes of unit development and revision, introduction of new units, learner registration, lists of modules with their units, and the credit tariffs and rules of combination for all pathways. This handbook has been produced (and revised) annually for the last

four years. Although the AVA was not yet offering the Diploma, the review team noted some internal inconsistencies and ambiguities in the handbook relating to the total number and levels of credits currently required for successful completion of each pathway. The team queried this in its meeting with HEAC members but they appeared to be unaware of the inconsistencies in the stated requirements. The team considered that the handbook would require a thorough revision before the AVA introduces the Diploma. It is therefore a condition of licence that, prior to commencing to offer the Access to HE Diploma, the AVA revises, where necessary, its award requirements, rules of combination and any related policy and guidance documentation to ensure that they are consistent with the requirements of The Access to Higher Education Diploma and credit specifications.

Scrutiny and approval process

49 Following the collegial development process of pathways, modules and units, noted above, a submission is made to a CAF Development Group scrutiny panel. This scrutiny panel also develops the credit tariffs and rules of combination required for the pathway. HEAC receives a recommendation from this scrutiny panel and confirms formal approval.

Guidance for scrutiny and validation panels

50 The AVA has clear guidance as to the membership of scrutiny panels. Guidance notes were also available for Chairs of non-CAF validation panels but there is no guidance documentation for CAF scrutiny panels which would make members aware of their roles and responsibilities or of the importance of declaring any conflicts of interest. Similarly, there were no guidance documents detailing the role of AVA officers at such panels. It is a condition of licence that the AVA produces guidance for scrutiny panel members which clearly identifies its requirements for independence, the roles and responsibilities of panel members and of AVA officers attending

the panel, and which also states the purpose, conduct and possible outcomes of the validation process. This guidance should take due account of the relevant AVA licensing criteria for programme validation.

Pathway validation process

51 The review team found, when reviewing the papers related to the scrutiny panels that were tabled for HEAC in June 2007, two cases where the names of those attending the scrutiny panels were missing; and in two other cases, members of the scrutiny panel were also unit writers; additionally there did not always appear to be HEI representatives on the panels. Furthermore, the panel members were likely to be from colleges that could be intending to offer the pathway and therefore could be considered to have a vested interest in the pathway's approval. The team formed the view that the boundary between the AVA's development and validation procedures was unclear, due to the lack of AVA guidance and procedures noted above. The team also found that the AVA did not appear to be fully enforcing the scrutiny panels' independence, was inconsistent in its recording of the panels' composition and outcomes, and that HEAC had insufficient evidence upon which it could confer formal recognition to pathways. It is a condition of licence that the AVA revises its pathway validation process and guidance to ensure a suitable level of rigour and independence in the process. In revising its validation process, the AVA should ensure that HEAC receives full and accurate records of approval panels for its consideration of pathways for formal approval. A statement that QAA recognition may be given only to programmes which are delivered in the UK should be included.

Centre approval for providers seeking to offer CAF pathways

52 Separate from the pathway validation process, providers are approved to run validated Access to HE pathways via a centre approval process which involves completing a standard form provided by the AVA. This form

was developed by another awarding body and reference to that organisation is still present. Development officers support providers in completing the form and then check it through to confirm its completeness. Once complete, this is passed to the Director of Access for approval. At this stage HEAC is advised that the centre has been approved. From the evidence provided, the review team found little documented linkage between centre approval and an assessment of providers' capacity to deliver particular pathways. There is no requirement for external subject expertise in the centre approval process. The centre approval form's information requirements were confined to the administrative arrangements needed for the programme and did not seek information about mechanisms for targeting students, programme organisation and methods to assure the coherence of students' programmes of study. These are all requirements of the licensing criteria and continue to be found in documentation used by the AVA for validating non-CAF programmes or pathways. The team concluded that, taken as a whole, the pathway validation and centre approval processes did not fully cover the licensing requirements. It is therefore a condition of licence that the AVA reviews its centre approval process, in the context of revisions to its pathway validation process, to ensure that the relevant licensing criteria for programme validation can be met.

Annual monitoring, review and modification

53 The AVA requires providers to undertake an annual self-assessment process. The outcomes of this are documented in providers' annual review documents which are forwarded to the AVA in August. Information from these provider reviews is fed into the annual AVA report to QAA. The annual reviews seen in the audit trails were comprehensive and included consideration of student feedback.

54 Within the CAF Handbook for providers, the process for the modification of pathways or the addition of units is clearly stated.

55 The CAF is subject to a year-on-year rolling review of the fitness for purpose of the units it contains. All providers take part in this review but there is no requirement for external input into this process. The review team considered the concept of a rolling review to be potentially valuable and concluded that it could contribute to the AVA's periodic revalidation process. However, the team estimated that at current rates it could be 10 years before some subject sectors would be subject to the rolling review process, while other subjects will have been reviewed three times in the same period. It is a condition of licence that the AVA increases the number of subject sectors reviewed each year to ensure that all are reviewed at least once every five years.

Periodic revalidation

56 The development of the CAF in 2004 has meant that quinquennial revalidation has not yet commenced for providers offering CAF pathways. Non-CAF provision is being transferred to CAF when revalidation is due and these providers are not required to undertake an evaluation of their last five years' provision.

57 The review team found that, despite the development of guidelines for the revalidation process being a condition of the 2006 licensing report, the AVA has not yet devised a system for revalidating the overall CAF framework or its pathways which requires a critical, self-analysis by providers of their last five years' delivery. The AVA therefore has no process which addresses the continuing appropriateness of the pathway/provision (see Recognition Scheme licensing criterion 3.5), including its rules of combination, which takes account of the outcomes of the annual review process and includes HE representation. Whether the process for pathway revalidation is linked to, or separate from, the periodic centre reapproval process, providers should be required to critically review their provision at least once every five years. It is therefore a condition of licence that the AVA develops an appropriate system and guidance for the revalidation of the CAF and its pathways. A suitable level of independence should be included in the process.

58 Overall, the review team found that the AVA's processes for development of Access to HE provision were effective but that its procedures and guidance relating to formal validation and revalidation, at both pathway and provider levels, required attention. In meeting the licensing conditions specified above, it would be beneficial for the AVA to undertake an holistic review of its procedures to ensure that they are fit for purpose for the ongoing development of the CAF, in the context of the Access to HE Diploma.

Promotion and development of Access to HE

59 The AVA provides a number of events and opportunities for Access to HE providers and HE receivers to meet to discuss and share good practice and other issues. The review team concluded that the AVA offers a suitable range of opportunities to support the assurance and enhancement of Access to HE in the region.

Principle 4

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

60 OCNSWR discharges its responsibility for external programme monitoring and assessment primarily through the use of external moderators. Its Access Tutor Handbook and CAF Guidelines state that 'external moderation is a central part of its quality assurance process as it ensures the quality of learning and the consistency and credibility of the award of credits'.

61 Three models of external moderation are operated depending on the number of pathways being offered by a provider. Where there is only one pathway then an external moderator is appointed; where there are two pathways then two sole moderators are appointed who are subject specialists. External moderators and sole moderators visit providers in the spring and summer terms. If there are three or more pathways then a lead moderator is appointed who coordinates, oversees and advises a team of subject moderators allocated

to specific pathways. Lead moderators make three visits each year. The AVA amended its procedures in 2006-07 so that subject moderators are not required to make interim visits unless requested to do so by the Director of Quality. Most moderators operate across more than one provider and the external moderator may also be the OCN's quality reviewer which helps to ensure consistency of standards across providers.

62 In its Overview, the AVA indicated that it was considering the advantages of moving to allowing awards following successful and thorough internal moderation processes in a limited way, possibly to begin in 2009-10. The first step would be to reduce the external moderation sample where the AVA had identified robust internal verification systems were in place. In discussions, AVA officers indicated that they had reviewed this issue and were now unlikely to follow this course of action. The review team concurred with the AVA officers that the current procedures significantly assisted the AVA to discharge its responsibility for the maintenance of standards.

Description of role

63 Guidance on the role of moderators is provided in the Guidelines for Access to HE moderators which is supplemented with an annual update. Moderators who met with the review team commented on the usefulness of this documentation and on the quality of support they receive from AVA staff. All moderators are expected to attend moderator briefings as required, ensure programmes are being operated as set out in the definitive programme documents, monitor adherence with the requirements of the Access Centre Recognition Agreement, carry out sampling in line with OCNSWR guidelines in order to verify learner achievement, ensure consistency in the award of credit, and monitor and report on the quality of the learner experience. Final moderation normally happens on one day except where this is agreed as logistically difficult.

64 Providers are required to demonstrate that they have effective internal moderation

procedures in place. The AVA has recently strengthened its requirements for internal monitoring processes and these are checked and reported on by moderators as part of their visits. Access to HE coordinators and moderators commented on the positive impact that these changes have had on systems and processes within centres. The review team commends the AVA for the actions it has taken to strengthen providers' internal moderation processes.

65 The review team confirmed that the moderation process was operating as specified by the AVA. The team formed the view that there was a clearly specified definition of the function of moderation which included the maintenance and enhancement of the quality and fitness for purpose of Access to HE programmes at the local level; the student experience; the verification of achievement; and an overview of the conduct of assessment, which ensures that approved programmes are being delivered and that students are receiving fair and equitable treatment.

Moderator appointment

66 The recruitment of new moderators is carried out by internal advertising to centres and via the local press. Applicants complete a standard form which is scrutinised by AVA officers to ensure that moderators have appropriate expertise, current curriculum knowledge and are external to the provider. The Director of Quality allocates moderators; initial appointments are confirmed by HEAC at its autumn meeting and any revised allocations reported to, and approved at, its spring meeting.

67 Moderators are not appointed unless they have attended training and appropriate updating and work shadowing is encouraged. New moderators also have a one to one induction session with the Director of Quality. Moderator contracts are with OCNSWR and are reissued on an annual basis. Moderators receive a separate contract for each centre to which they are appointed.

68 The maximum period of appointment of moderators to any one programme is four years but their expertise may then be used elsewhere within the AVA. At the time of the introduction of the CAF, some moderators' contracts with centres had been extended for a further year to enable continuity at a time of change.

69 The AVA issues written guidance for moderators covering matters such as authentication, plagiarism, dealing with students who have special circumstances, extenuating circumstances, programme amendments and reporting arrangements. Moderators' meetings are held on a regional basis and moderators are supported in their work by AVA officers and by lead moderators where appropriate.

70 Providers complete moderator evaluation forms at the end of each year which are acted on by the Director of Quality where necessary. From its discussions with moderators and AVA officers, and from a review of the documentation, the review team was able to confirm that OCNSWR had in place procedures that ensure that those who act on the AVA's behalf to monitor the quality of Access to HE programmes and the standards of student achievement moderators are competent to do so.

71 The review team considered that the AVA could further strengthen its procedures by ensuring that HEAC received details of the length of moderator contracts with providers. This would enable HEAC to check that the AVA is discharging its responsibility under the licence to ensure that contracts are not normally issued for more than four years.

72 The review team noted that an AVA officer had also been appointed as a moderator. The AVA officers indicated that this was an exceptional situation arising because of the difficulty of finding appropriate moderators. While the review team accepted this rationale, it noted that the issue had not been discussed and agreed by HEAC, and HEAC members who met with the team acknowledged that there was a potential conflict of interest. The team considered that this matter should have been brought to the attention of HEAC as a matter

for consideration and that greater clarity in the terms of reference of HEAC as the locus of authority for Access to HE provision would help clarify responsibilities.

Standardisation

73 In its Overview, the AVA stated that 'comparison of standards and judgments across AVA's provision is adequate, has improved, but needs further improvement'. The review team considered the standardisation processes in place and discussed the arrangements with AVA officers, Access to HE providers and moderators.

74 The Access Tutor Handbook states that it is intended that the standardisation process should be a helpful, constructive exercise that reassures tutors that they are marking consistently. Two standardisation events are normally held on a regional basis each year. These had been moved to the autumn from the summer term to enable new tutors to attend. A summary report, as bullet points, is provided to HEAC. Standardisation also continues on an unstructured basis with quality reviewers, moderators and the Access to HE officers liaising to ensure that examples of good practice are used in developing programmes and pathways.

75 The review team concluded that the AVA is developing appropriate procedures for standardisation but recommends that these would benefit from the development of a clear overview of the purposes of standardisation and methods for the dissemination of effective practice.

Moderator reports

76 Moderators complete reports on all visits via a standard report form which covers a variety of topics, including actions taken in response to issues from the previous year, areas of good practice and those for improvement. Reports are completed within 10 working days of the final moderation visit. Lead moderators receive reports from all of the subject moderators within their area so that they can compile a summary report. The report form was significantly enhanced for use in 2006-07

to ensure that there was greater detail and consistency across the AVA. The review team commends the AVA on the steps it has taken to maintain standards and enhance quality through developing and implementing the revised moderator report form.

77 Moderators' reports are returned to the AVA where they are circulated to the head of the provider and Access to HE coordinators, viewed by a quality support officer, the Director of Quality, Access to HE officers and the OCN quality reviewer. At its autumn meeting, HEAC receives and approves the actions of a summary report on Access to HE moderation from the Director of Quality and confirms any actions imposed on programmes or centres as an outcome of the moderation process.

78 The review team was able to review the annual reporting on moderation and its consideration by HEAC through the papers and minutes of HEAC meetings and its discussions with committee members and staff. The annual report for 2006-07 consisted of a bulleted list of issues of good practice and issues for attention under three headings: assessment practice, internal quality systems and the learner experience. The team considered that the evidence in the written report was insufficient to provide HEAC with information to fulfil its role in the establishment and maintenance of standards. This written report was augmented by an oral report from the Director of Quality and an associated action plan. While this gave more confidence in the overall process, the team noted that many HEAC members were unable to attend meetings (see also paragraph 35 above) and hence the written papers provided essential confirmation of quality and standards. Furthermore, there was no record in the minutes of HEAC from the preceding year that confirmed that matters arising from the moderation process and agreed in the action plan, had been addressed. The AVA should review its processes of monitoring the implementation of agreed action plans so that it can fulfil its responsibility for ensuring the effective use of the outcomes of the moderation process to improve and enhance recognised Access to HE programmes. It is a

condition of licence that the AVA strengthens, at committee level, its capacity to act on and monitor actions resulting from its quality assurance processes. This should ensure that HEAC receives sufficiently detailed written reports on which to make judgements and fulfil its responsibilities on key processes.

79 From 2007-08, the AVA has introduced an annual analysis of the moderation process compiled by the Director of Quality using the Vanguard self-assessment system. The review team was able to view a draft of this report which was in preparation for the March 2008 meeting of HEAC. The report provided an overview of the moderation process, including the interval between visits and reports to the AVA and the subsequent time of forwarding reports to providers. Although the team was not able to consider the use made by HEAC and the AVA of this information, it appeared to the team that the Vanguard approach had the potential to enhance significantly the AVA's processes for handling moderation.

Issuing of awards

80 OCNSWR does not currently award the Access to HE Diploma but intends to do so from 2008-09. OCNSWR already requires at least 45 credits at level 3 for Access to HE certificates and (with the exception of those matters identified in Principle 3 above) will need to make relatively minor amendments to its programme requirements to enable the award of Diplomas.

81 At the time of the review, the AVA was in the process of implementing revised specifications for examination boards in response to a condition set following its licence application. The review team was able to confirm that detailed guidance on the composition, role and functioning of examination boards had been produced but, due to the timing of the visit, was not in a position to comment on their implementation. The condition required the AVA to put in place a method of confirming that examination boards had been successfully carried out. The revised guidance implied that this would be reported on as part of moderators' reports on

the conduct of the assessment process; however, moderators with whom the team spoke were as yet unaware of this requirement. The team recommends that the AVA amends its moderator report forms to require moderators to comment specifically on the functioning of examination boards.

82 The arrangements for the issue of certificates require moderators and tutors to sign off Recommendations for the Award of Credit (RACs) at the final meeting after moderation has been completed. Once RACs are received in the office, AVA staff check that all the programme requirements have been met and then final awards are approved. Formal responsibility for issuing Access to HE certificates is delegated from the Board to HEAC. HEAC itself delegates this authority to officers because of the timing of the process. The review team concluded that the AVA has specified procedures and clear criteria for the award of an Access to HE certificate to students, and heard of the steps the AVA had taken to formally document its procedures and to ensure that students received certificates at the same time, or before, the issuing of A-level results. The latter was much appreciated by Access to HE coordinators with whom the team met. However, the team could find no record of HEAC receiving a report on the issuing of certificates and the manner in which its responsibilities were being discharged.

Certificates and transcripts

83 OCNSWR's Access to HE certificates and transcripts have a standard format. The review team discussed the process of issuing certificates and transcripts, and replacements where necessary, with AVA officers and Access to HE coordinators. From its review of the evidence, the team was able to confirm that certificates and transcripts and the arrangements for their issuing met licensing requirements and were part of a regulated process, although it noted that the draft procedural manual for staff (see paragraph 38) had incorrect information on the requirements for the award of an Access to HE certificate.

Audit trails

84 The review team conducted six audit trails of the AVA's providers. The purpose of these trails was to enable the team to consider the consistency and effectiveness of the AVA's processes at provider level.

85 The providers selected for trails comprised an appropriate sample of Access to HE programmes validated by OCNSWR. The group consisted of five colleges of varying sizes situated in four sub-regions of the South West and an adult education provider. Because of the recent merger, some of the documentation under scrutiny had originated in one of the two predecessor AVAs. Providers from both of those AVAs were included.

86 The review team was presented with audit trail files which included, where available, moderation, monitoring and evaluation documentation for the years 2004-05 to 2006-07. The files included documents relating to centre approval, providers' annual reviews, details of changes or amendments to the programme, revalidation arrangements, moderators' reports and, in some cases, results from student evaluation questionnaires or focus groups. Not all of these documents were available for all the providers in the audit trails. The programmes included those that were part of the CAF, those that have transferred to the CAF and those that are planning to move to the CAF in 2008-09. They covered the following range of subjects: fine and applied art, health and science, journalism, nursing and sport.

87 The audit trails included four examples of centre approval documentation which comprise the providers' commentary on OCNSWR's constitutional requirements. Most of these centres had been approved under the previous AVA structures but the move to the CAF necessitated the completion of a checklist to ensure smooth transfer. Centre approval pro forma require assurances on the provision of an adequate standard of teaching and access to learning facilities, the adequacy of support systems, support for moderation and assessment, and confirmation of adherence to the AVA's quality assurance requirements.

88 There was evidence that amendments or changes to the programmes, especially those joining the CAF, were supported by rigorous documentation which required providers to identify their aims, the target group, progression into the programme, recruitment, admissions and initial guidance, programme organisation, support for learners and a range of other matters. Where there were records of panel meetings, they further demonstrated the robustness of the process.

89 In the examples of the approval process, the review team formed the view that the procedure had been thorough and effective and left the applicants in no doubt of their requirements and responsibilities for CAF, which the team considered to be appropriately rigorous. However, the OCNSWR has had no new centres to approve since the merger in 2006 so the procedures relate to those of the former AVAs.

90 Annual programme reviews from providers are central to the AVA's quality assurance of its Access to HE provision and may use the college's own self-assessment format. The reviews cover factual information, such as learner registrations and completions, and evaluate the effectiveness of the programme. The reviews were thorough and analytical and drew attention to potential risks.

91 The report forms for external moderators' visits, which normally take place twice a year, have been revised in the last year and there was a noticeable improvement in the information gathered and the moderators' approach to their task. The revised template encourages analysis and consistency. Recommendations from moderators are used to form a centre action plan and AVA officers check that centres have addressed the issues raised. It was clear that progress on meeting specific recommendations was monitored effectively, for example on the design of information technology input to a programme, a recommendation was monitored over a three-year period. Moderators also identify examples of good practice which are disseminated through the Access to HE Forums and Annual Conference and in the mandatory moderator training sessions.

92 Access to HE providers complete an evaluation form about the effectiveness of external moderation. In June 2007, one centre stated: 'Your people apply a lot of common sense and are always willing to talk through any problems I may have. I think that's good customer service'.

93 None of the audit trail files contained examples of publicity material for Access to HE programmes. However, the review team did see a range of other publicity material, some for these centres, which covered both prospectus and promotional leaflets. There were no examples of providers using the QAA logo to support the promotion of their programmes. The AVA may wish to encourage providers more strongly and provide advice on the use of the QAA logo.

94 The audit trails confirmed the impression that the review team had formed of a quality assurance framework operated by OCNSWR that was responsive to its providers' needs while being effective in assuring standards across a 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. Given the changes that have taken place over the last eighteen months, the procedures evidenced in the audit trails suggest that the procedures of the two AVAs, adopted and developed by OCNSWR were increasingly rigorous and robust.

Conclusions

95 OCNSWR is a new AVA recently formed from the merger of two well-established AVAs and was granted a provisional licence in 2006. It has developed effective and productive links with key stakeholders in the region and, as a new organisation, is still developing policies and procedures owned and understood by its Access to HE providers. A consistent theme in the discussions of the review team with moderators, Access to HE providers and stakeholders was their high regard for AVA officers' professionalism and responsiveness.

96 OCNSWR operates across a wide geographical region which poses some

challenges, such as attendance at meetings. Regional standardisation and moderator meetings help to ensure the effective operation of key processes.

97 The AVA is still developing structures and procedures that support the effective operation of the Board and HEAC which is the main locus of authority for Access to HE provision. The Board has been operating with almost the minimum number of members specified in its Articles and with limited representation from its four stakeholder groups. Ensuring that there is appropriate expertise available to the Board and that meetings are quorate has proved problematic. The licensing team had been concerned that the Board's composition might not be sufficient 'to ensure as far as is reasonably possible that meetings are conducted with appropriate representation in terms of sectors, skills and experience' and although the present review team heard of steps which were now being taken to address this issue, it considered the organisation has been slow to respond to this issue.

98 A condition from the initial licensing report required that the Board's and HEAC's remits should be revised to ensure that the annual AVA report to QAA was formally approved by the Board, in line with QAA expectations. While the remits had been amended, the review team heard that, due to the timing of its meetings, the Board did not formally consider the report to QAA until after it had been submitted, preferring to leave this to an informal sub-group. It was not clear why the timing of the Board could not be amended to ensure that this licensing requirement was met.

99 The Board devolves its responsibilities for Access to HE to HEAC; however, HEAC's terms of reference do not clearly locate this responsibility within its remit, suggesting, for example, that its role is largely to confirm decisions made by officers or by scrutiny panels. Any provider can be represented on HEAC and hence its composition is changeable and its operation further affected by the difficulty of travel to meetings. Through examination of HEAC's minutes and papers, the

review team was unable to identify clearly that it was fulfilling its responsibilities as the locus of authority for the operation of the AVA licence. The level of detail in some of the reports HEAC received and its minutes was insufficient to inform fully those unable to attend its meetings or to provide a record to ensure that agreed actions were being implemented.

100 The AVA is bringing all of its provision within its CAF which had been developed in one of the previous AVAs and is now being extended across the region. The process of engaging with the CAF is having a significant beneficial effect on Access to HE in the region, enabling Access to HE providers to come together to debate and discuss issues and to have shared ownership of the outcomes. However, through the committee minutes and associated reports it was not clear that there was significant independence in the scrutiny of the final CAF programme and pathway approval documentation and hence that the AVA had met the requirements of its licence approval that 'all new Access to HE programmes are validated by a group of members which includes both HE and FE representation independent from those involved in the development process and that this process is fully documented as with traditional validation panels'.

101 All programmes within the CAF are relatively new and have not yet reached the stage where they need to be reviewed. Despite a licensing condition that guidelines for the revalidation process be produced, the review team heard that these were still under development. Thus the procedures by which providers are reapproved to run Access to HE provision, and by which programmes within the CAF will be reapproved, are as yet unclear and the team was unable to reach a judgement on whether the AVA would meet the licensing requirements in these areas.

102 Moderators are the key element in the AVA's procedures for assuring the monitoring of quality and standards. Robust procedures are in place for the selection, training, support and reporting of moderators. Evaluation of

moderators by providers and actions taken by officers help ensure that moderators fulfil their duties. The AVA has taken action to help providers improve their internal moderation processes to further assist moderators in their work. The AVA is taking steps, through the application of the Vanguard process review system, to develop further its processes in this area through, for example, closer monitoring of the length of interval between visits and submission of reports.

103 The licensing report in 2006 required the AVA to develop notes for final assessment boards which include issues to be addressed and a method of confirming that the board has been successfully carried out. While the review team was able to confirm that guidance on the functioning of final assessment boards had been produced, had formed part of moderators' training and were about to be issued to providers, moderators were unclear about their role in monitoring the examination board process.

104 The AVA produces generally accurate, clearly written and helpful documentation for its providers and stakeholders and is in the process of developing a detailed operations manual. The AVA is not currently awarding the Access to HE Diploma but intends to be in a position to do so for 2008-09. Secure and robust systems are in place for the issuing of the Access to HE qualification.

105 The rationalisation of the operation of the work of the two previous AVAs into the work of OCNSWR, changes in office location, and financial difficulties leading to key changes in staffing and contracts have all impacted on the work of the AVA since awarded its provisional licence. The review team heard of actions being taken to address these issues but was concerned over the nature of the challenges facing the AVA and the uncertainty about its future financial stability, the functioning of the Board and its Access to HE committee, and the extent to which it had acted to ensure that, by the time of the licence confirmation review visit, it had fully met the AVA licensing criteria.

Commendations

106 The AVA is commended for the:

- i coherent and inclusive business and strategic planning process involving the Board, HEAC and AVA officers (paragraph 30)
- ii commitment, dedication and contribution made by staff and their support of moderators, providers, tutors and other key stakeholders (paragraph 37)
- iii effective and proactive communication mechanisms developed with providers and other stakeholders (paragraph 41)
- iv collaborative approach in the ongoing development of the Common Access Framework (paragraph 47)
- v actions it has taken to strengthen providers' internal moderation processes (paragraph 64)
- vi steps taken to maintain standards and enhance quality through developing and implementing the revised moderator report form (paragraph 76).

The AVA licence

107 The review team recommends that OCNSWR is granted a provisional confirmation of its AVA licence, with the following conditions and a further review visit by autumn 2009.

Conditions

108 The licence is provisionally confirmed on condition that the AVA:

- i expands the Board's membership in order to meet the categories of stakeholder representation specified in its Memorandum and Articles of Association, and extends its skills, expertise and regional representation (paragraph 20)
- ii ensures that Board meetings are scheduled to enable the whole Board to approve the annual AVA report to QAA (paragraph 22)
- iii reviews its committee structure to ensure that it can discharge its responsibilities for Access to HE rigorously with clear and formal accountability (paragraphs 24, 35, 51, 78)
- iv completes its administrative procedures document so that all staff can operate to the same guidelines (paragraph 38)

- v prior to commencing to offer the Access to HE Diploma, revises, where necessary, its award requirements, rules of combination and any related policy and guidance documentation to ensure that they are consistent with the requirements of The Access to Higher Education Diploma and credit specifications (paragraph 48)
- vi produces guidance for CAF scrutiny panel members which clearly identifies its requirements for independence, the roles and responsibilities of panel members and of AVA officers attending the panel, and which also states the purpose, conduct and possible outcomes of the validation process (paragraph 50)
- vii revises its pathway validation process to ensure a suitable level of rigour and independence in the process (paragraph 51)
- viii revises its centre approval process, in the context of revisions to the pathway validation process, to ensure that the relevant licensing criteria for programme validation can be met (paragraph 52)
- ix increases the number of subject sector areas in which units are reviewed each year to ensure that all are reviewed at least once every five years (paragraph 55)
- x develops an appropriate system and guidance for the revalidation of the CAF and its pathways (paragraph 57)
- xi strengthens, at committee level, its capacity to act on and monitor actions resulting from its quality assurance processes (paragraph 78)
- xii fully implements its response to the review conditions specified above.
- ii develops terms of reference for its Board and sets a maximum term of office for directors of the Board (paragraph 19)
- iii develops its strategies to ensure participation in its meetings in ways other than face-to-face (paragraph 21)
- iv reviews the Board's changing requirements for external advice and governance support and considers how those requirements are best met (paragraph 28)
- v explores alternative solutions for the secure storage, retrieval and analysis of Access to HE related data (paragraph 39)
- vi develops a clear overview of the purposes of standardisation and methods for the dissemination of effective practice (paragraph 75)
- vii amends its moderator report forms to require moderators to comment specifically on the functioning of examination boards (paragraph 81).

Conditions (i) to (xi) to be met by 30 September 2008. Condition (xii) to be met by 31 March 2009.

Recommendations to the AVA

109 The review team recommends that the AVA:

- i institutes a formal annual general meeting in line with the standard for such meetings (paragraph 18)

Appendix

Aims and objectives of AVA review

The aims of the system of AVA review are to:

- i provide the basis for an informed judgement by the ARLC about the fitness of the AVA to continue as a licensed agency
- ii 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 stimulate reflective and self-critical perspectives within AVAs, as an instrument to promote quality enhancement
- iv provide an opportunity to identify and disseminate good practice of AVA operations
- v provide a mechanism for ensuring necessary, and encouraging desirable, improvements and developments in AVAs.

The objectives of each AVA review are to:

- i examine, assess and report on:
 - the development of, and changes in, the AVA since its last review or initial licence, and its plans and targets for the future
 - the organisation's continuing viability and robustness and the ways in which the AVA demonstrates sound governance
 - the efficiency and effectiveness of the AVA's operational and quality assurance systems
 - the range and scope of the AVA's activities, and the appropriateness and value of these activities
 - the ways in which the AVA approves and monitors programmes and the ways in which these processes take account of the need for consistency and comparability
 - the ways in which the AVA satisfies itself of the adequacy and comparability of standards achieved by students gaining the Access to HE certificate
 - the evidence available to indicate the AVA's success in achieving its aims and targets
- ii to identify and report on:
 - strengths and good practice in procedures and operations
 - areas which would benefit from further development
 - areas requiring attention.

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