



Access to Higher Education

Open College Network
North West Region

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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, a committee of the QAA board of directors.

2 The Access Recognition and Licensing Committee is responsible for overseeing the processes of AVA licensing and periodic review and re-licensing. The criteria applied by the Access Recognition and Licensing Committee 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 Access Recognition and Licensing Committee. 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 the Open College Network North West Region. QAA is grateful to the Open College Network North West Region 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 Open College Network North West Region 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 the Open College Network North West Region 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 the Open College Network North West Region to finalise other arrangements for the review.

6 The review visit took place on 13 to 15 May 2008. The visit to the Open College Network North West Region consisted principally of meetings with representatives of the Open College Network North West Region, including AVA officers; members of the board, the Access to HE committee; moderators for Access to HE programmes; Access to HE providers; and local and regional stakeholders.

7 The review team consisted of Mr Mike Farmer, an Access Recognition and Licensing Committee member and educational consultant, Farmer Associates; Dr Dawn Edwards, Deputy Head of School, St Mary's College, Twickenham and Mr Nick Wiseman, South West Lifelong Learning Network, Curriculum Strand Leader. The review was coordinated for QAA by Professor Chris Clare.

The AVA context

8 The Open College Network North West Region was formed in August 2005 following the merger of Greater Manchester Open College Network and Open College Network (Merseyside, Lancashire and Cheshire). It gained an initial AVA licence in July 2006. In the 2005-06 academic session, the open college network operated under the two AVA licences of the Greater Manchester Open College Network and the Open College Network (Merseyside, Lancashire and Cheshire). In August 2006, the formal legal merger of the two organisations was completed, and the 2006-07 academic year was the first year of operation of the Open College Network North West Region under its own licence. At the same time, the open college network was also preparing to introduce the new QAA Access to Higher Education Diploma, from September 2007 in some centres and in all providers from 2008.

AVA statistics 2006-07

9 The AVA reported the following statistics in its annual report to QAA for 2006-07:

Providers offering Access to HE courses	34
Access to HE courses available	76
Access to HE courses running	52
Access to HE learner registrations	3,504
Access to HE certificates awarded	2,102

10 The open college network now operates as a regional open college network, whereas the former open college networks operated within named subregions with shared and sometimes overlapping areas of activity. In the north of the region, Cumbria was served by the Open College Network North East Region until September 2007, when Cumbria's provision joined the Open College Network North West Region. The open college network extends from Carlisle in the north to Crewe in the south, from Oldham in the east to the Wirral in the west. The open college network also operates as an AVA in Northern Ireland, where there is one Access to HE provider at Omagh.

11 The open college network's domain is coterminous with that of the North West Development Agency and there is a regional learning and skills council based in Manchester, with five area offices serving Greater Manchester, Merseyside, Cumbria, Cheshire and Lancashire. The North West region has 11 higher education institutions of which nine are members of the open college network, the exceptions being the University of Lancaster and the University of Central Lancashire. The newly created University of Cumbria is a member and runs Access to HE provision.

12 There are a number of lifelong learning networks in the region and the open college network works with them and is represented at different levels in their structures. There are also a number of Aimhigher partnerships and the open college network works closely with two of these, those for Manchester and for Merseyside, and is involved with several collaborative projects across the region.

13 The open college network has, over the last two years, undertaken the following activities. It has:

- incorporated a new organisation entailing new governance, committee and management structures
- merged two offices into one, and implemented a new staff structure while investing in new premises in Liverpool
- reviewed the existing Access to HE programme offer and then drafted and approved a regional Access to HE framework to support the introduction of the new QAA Access to HE Diploma (simultaneously reviewing and revising policies and procedures for Access to HE)
- invested in a new information technology (IT) infrastructure.

These activities followed analysis and assessment of existing systems, policies and procedures and represent a process of self-assessment by the AVA, of its performance against the criteria of the QAA licence and to support the development of the service it provides for its

Access to HE provider organisations and stakeholders within the region.

14 The Open College Network North West Region submitted its initial application for a licence in the summer of 2006. A provisional licence was issued with conditions to be met; all of these conditions were met by 5 January 2007, with one exception, which was met by 7 November 2007.

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

Constitution, legal identity and purpose

15 The Open College Network North West Region is a company limited by guarantee incorporated in May 2005 and a charity registered in April 2006. It is responsible and accountable to its members and operates in accordance with the regulations of the *Companies Act 2006*. A fully audited set of accounts is prepared each year by the auditors and approved by the board before submission to Companies House and Charity Commission. The AVA's Memorandum and Articles of Association serve as its formal constitution, containing details of its legal identity, function, aims and structures, and limit the legal liability of members and their representatives. Legal advice was taken during the incorporation and in drawing up the AVA's Memorandum and Articles of Association. The AVA's aims are congruent with the overall purpose and aims of the *Recognition Scheme*.

16 The purpose and principal activities of the Open College Network North West Region as stated in the objects of the charity are to 'advance the education of the public by promoting and widening participation in, and improving the quality and flexibility of education, learning and training particularly by those who have benefited least from educational

opportunities'. It also aims to improve access to learning opportunities and facilitate progression to further learning through the award of credit and credit-based qualifications.

Governance

17 The governance structure of the Open College Network North West Region emerged from those of its precursor open college networks, which were well established. The Open College Network North West Region has a main board, whose members are all trustees, and four subcommittees: the finance and resources committee, the Access to HE committee, the search committee and the quality committee. The quality committee only oversees the non-Access to HE open college network work and does not therefore consider any items which fall under the QAA licence. Each committee is chaired by a trustee and is accountable and reports to the board. Day-to-day decision-making is delegated to the Chief Executive and three managers: the business development manager, who oversees the development and monitoring of courses; the operations manager who is responsible for the administration of the charity; and the quality and standards manager. Trustees are required to operate in accordance with the Nolan Principles.

18 The board is the locus of authority for the AVA and includes representatives from a range of organisations that share the AVA's aims. Its role and remit includes offering awards and qualifications, promoting and maintaining the standards of all awards, developing and approving the strategic business plan and agreeing the annual budget. Appointment as a trustee of the charity is open to all member organisations, from which nominations are sought when a vacancy arises. Trustees are elected to the board by the annual general meeting for a two-year term. One-third of trustees must retire at each annual general meeting. A minimum of eight and a maximum of 16 trustees are allowed, although discussions with the board revealed the optimum number to be in the region of 12. The AVA has taken steps to ensure equality and adequate regional

representation on its board and subcommittees through the work of the search committee, which advises on the selection and recruitment of new board and committee members. Although the work of the search committee helps protect the AVA from the undue influence of any one, or a minority group of its stakeholders, the review team noted that this was not made explicit within the Open College Network North West Region's Memorandum.

19 From discussions with trustees and other stakeholders, the review team formed the view that trustees identify with the values of the Open College Network North West Region, support its mission, and see Access to HE as an important and integral part of the organisation. Review of documentation and discussions with the trustees highlighted some difficulty in gaining nominations to replace trustees who have retired. However, the team noted that the AVA was actively seeking new trustees, with membership currently standing at 11. The team found, through discussions with the trustees, that the board is not fully cognisant of the policies and procedures laid down in the AVA's Memorandum and Articles of Association. Examples of this are the requirement that 50 per cent of the membership of each subcommittee of the board should comprise trustees and the status of the subcommittees in terms of which are formal standing committees of the board. The AVA should therefore review its Memorandum and Articles of Association and in doing so, revise the status of, membership criteria for, and minimum number of members of, the subcommittees of the board. This is a condition of the licence. In addition, it is recommended that the AVA review the means by which governance advice is received by the board and its subcommittees, to ensure that trustees are made aware of relevant policies and procedures as required and given the support required to fulfil adequately their duties.

Membership

20 The Open College Network North West Region is a membership organisation. It has formal membership regulations within the Memorandum and Articles of Association which detail the criteria that organisations must satisfy to become members. Organisations wishing to become a member and offer Access to HE programmes are required to complete a centre recognition application form. This is reviewed by the quality and standards manager who makes a recommendation to the Access to HE Committee.

21 Member organisations are drawn from across the North West region, and include most further education colleges in the area, nine higher education institutions, community and voluntary organisations, and private sector organisations. At the time of the review, 34 members were offering Access to HE programmes, of which one is in Northern Ireland.

22 All Access to HE providers have a right to become members and all members have voting rights and are entitled to participate in the AVA's governance structures.

23 Where there are concerns about a centre, the Quality Standards Manager develops an action plan to ensure compliance with the AVA's policies and procedures. If the centre does not comply with the action plan or is in serious breach of the centre recognition compliance criteria, the board has the authority to withdraw membership.

The committee structure

24 Each committee has a clearly defined remit and membership, and each is chaired by a member of the board. The board delegates many of its responsibilities to the three of its four subcommittees that are active: the Access to HE Committee, the quality committee and the search committee.

25 The Open College Network North West Region is keen to ensure that its AVA function has a distinct identity within its wider

operations. To this end, there is a clear separation between the remits of the quality committee and the Access to HE committee, with the latter having full responsibility for monitoring all matters relating to the quality assurance of the open college network's operation as an AVA. Through a systematic process of monitoring and review, the Access to HE committee ensures that all licence and quality assurance requirements relating to Access to HE provision are met. It is chaired by a trustee nominated by the board. Membership includes up to six members from higher education institutions and six from Access to HE providers. It was noted by the review team that the current membership does not include at least half trustees, as required by the Memorandum and Articles of Association, with only three out of 13 being board members. The committee meets regularly and attendance by members is generally good. Its agendas are wide-ranging and ensure that operational matters are fully considered. It also receives and considers the AVA's annual report for onward transmission to the board. The review team concluded from its consideration of the evidence, that the committee was fully aware of, and exercised, its responsibilities for Access to HE efficiently and well. It also noted the commitment and enthusiasm of its members.

26 The finance and resources committee has responsibility for monitoring all matters relating to the financial and human resources operations of the charity. Membership consists of a chair and up to seven members. However, it was noted that currently the membership stands at one, with this committee not having met since May 2006. Discussions with the board revealed that they had taken informal responsibility for finance and resource matters relating to the AVA, together with the Chief Executive. The review team noted that the board was unaware that this committee is a standing committee of the board and therefore cannot be disbanded under the current Memorandum and Articles of Association. Despite the lack of a functioning finance and resources committee, the review team formed the view that the board had received enough

information to inform their judgements in relation to finance and resources in this period. The Open College Network North West Region, in meeting the condition to review its Memorandum and Articles, is encouraged to reconsider the status of this committee and its membership.

27 The search committee is responsible for monitoring the skills, regional and sectoral representation, ethnicity and gender composition of the board and the extent to which the trustees fulfil such requirements, and recommend to the board action to be taken to maintain and improve participation in the governance structure provided by the Open College Network North West Region's board and its committees. Despite difficulties in nominating trustees and members of the board's committees, the review team noted that this committee is functioning as an ad hoc committee rather than a standing committee of the board, having met only once since its inception. In addition, it was not clear from the minutes of the board that all of the recommendations made by the search committee to the board had been given due consideration, or indeed had been approved. In light of the difficulty in appointing members for committees and the board, the Open College Network North West Region, in meeting the condition to review its Memorandum and Articles, is therefore strongly encouraged to reconsider the status of this committee.

Authority for Access to HE responsibilities

28 Within the Open College Network North West Region governance structure, the locus of authority for the AVA licence is with the board. The board delegates responsibility to its Access to HE committee for ensuring that AVA quality procedures meet QAA licensing requirements. From their examination of the Access to HE committee and board minutes, and discussions with board and committee members, the review team concluded that this responsibility was transparently located and satisfactorily exercised.

Principle 2

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

Strategic and operational planning

29 The AVA's current strategic plan covers the period 2006-09. It includes three national strategic priorities that relate to its role as an open college network and part of the NOCN and four regional strategic priorities. One of the four regional strategic priorities is to develop the AVA business of the open college network. Two of the others relate to the development of the whole organisation and one to the development of its open college network business. For its AVA strategic priority area, as for the other three, there is a set of strategic objectives, each of which is underpinned by appropriate performance measures, target achievement dates, relative priorities and risk levels, and is allocated to the responsibility of a member of AVA staff. Performance measures are expressed descriptively, in that their expression does not include specific numerical or financial values.

30 To support the strategic plan, the AVA develops annual operational plans which set out in a similar format the specific objectives and targets for the year in question, and ascribes responsibilities and risks. Such objectives and targets are consistent with the strategic plan. Progress towards these targets is regularly reported to the board, and the most recent operational plan includes some quantitative targets against which progress can be measured.

31 The current three-year strategic plan is the first for the AVA since its formal inauguration in 2006, and was approved by the board in November 2006. The board has not yet reviewed this plan, but the review team was advised that it was the AVA's intention to do so during 2008-09. No specific plans for the process of this review were provided to the team. However, the board did review the 2006-07 operational plan, and as a result,

some changes were made for 2007-08. The team was advised that the development of the strategic plan had been informed by informal feedback from providers and stakeholders. Those board members with a particular interest in Access to HE are able to comment on draft plans, but there did not appear to the team to be a formal role for the Access to HE committee in considering the relevant parts of the plans before their approval by the board. Some providers and stakeholders reported to the team that they found the AVA's plan helpful in informing their own planning, but the team formed the view that the involvement of all stakeholders in the planning process, particularly in relation to targets and forecasts, needed to be further developed. The AVA in its overview acknowledged that some of its key targets for 2005-07 were unrealistic and had not been met. In discussions with the team, AVA officers recognised that addressing the needs of all parts of the region, and in particular Cumbria, which had previously been covered by another open college network, was a challenge.

32 The review team concluded that, taken together, the strategic and operational plans provided an appropriate framework for expressing the AVA's objectives in relation to Access to HE. However, the strategic plan would benefit from a clearer expression of targets and forecasts in quantitative terms, against which progress can be more easily measured; the board has begun to take steps to develop such measures in the operational plan. The strategic planning process would also benefit from a more systematic approach to involving all stakeholders from across the whole of the region.

33 The AVA is therefore recommended to consider, when reviewing the strategic planning process, mechanisms for ensuring input from all stakeholders and for the development of appropriate targets and forecasts.

Operational efficiency and effectiveness, including self assessment, risk management and use of data

34 The open college network uses a system of self-assessment for its AVA-related activities using the QAA licensing criteria as the basis. However, it also recognises the danger that this might result in a compliance matter, rather than one of self-improvement. It therefore views self-assessment as a continuous process rather than a single event. The period from the granting of its initial licence has been one of continual reflection and development, involving a number of challenges resulting from the merger of two organisations, as described in paragraph 13. Despite a number of recent changes in personnel, and the relocation of the AVA to new premises, representatives of providers whom the review team met praised the efficiency of the AVA and its responsiveness to them on a day-to-day basis.

35 The open college network has assessed the risks across its whole operation, including those relating to its AVA-related activities, and these are contained in a risk register. The review team examined the risk assessment in relation to a possible loss of the use of OPUS, the AVA's IT-based system which the AVA uses for a number of critical functions. These include the registration of learners, the recording of their achievement and the issuing of certificates. The team was satisfied that the risk had been properly assessed and appropriate back-up systems in place.

36 The review team found the AVA's overview to be self-critical and willing to acknowledge where aspects of the organisation need to be further developed. In particular, the AVA reported a need to develop its use of data, both from internal and external sources, as part of its annual monitoring process and in support of strategic planning. The team wishes to encourage this development, and the AVA is recommended to consider more detailed analysis and interpretation of data, to contribute to more effective annual monitoring and strategic planning.

Committees and support for committees

37 In addition to the committees that form part of its governance structure, the AVA supports an Access to HE forum, which provides part of the communications system with providers. The board and its committees are serviced by different members of the management team, who are responsible for the production of reports. The board is supported by the Chief Executive. The operations manager also acts as clerk to the board, but this role is confined to administrative functions, and does not include advice to the board on governance matters.

38 The Chief Executive reported that if governance advice was required by the board, this is obtained from an external source, normally from a firm of solicitors. The review team considers that this is appropriate for significant issues, such as making changes to the Memorandum and Articles. However, the review team found that the board had not fully adhered to its Memorandum and Articles (see paragraphs 19, 26 and 27). The AVA is therefore recommended to review the means by which governance advice is received by the board and its subcommittees, particularly during meetings and when governance-related decisions are taken.

Financial regulation, management and scrutiny

39 The strategic plan for 2006-09 approved by the board included financial projections for all three years, and a budget for 2006-07. The AVA in its overview acknowledged that some of these projections were unrealistic and a substantial deficit was recorded for 2006-07. However, board members who met the review team provided assurances that it was aware of the impending financial loss well before the end of the financial year. The AVA uses a standard accounting package, and reports from this system enable the board to monitor income and expenditure on a regular basis. The Chief Executive has overall management responsibility for financial matters. His view, as expressed to members of the team, is that 2006-07 saw the

establishment of the new organisation, with a number of one-off costs (such as the purchase of the new premises and staffing reorganisation); 2007-08 will be a year of financial consolidation, and 2008-09 a year of building up the financial strength of the organisation.

40 The AVA has produced its first set of audited accounts for 2006-07, which were seen by members of the review team, although due to delays in their production they were not due to be formally approved until the first annual general meeting, which was after the date of the review visit. It was reported that the board had reviewed this situation and had recently changed auditors, so as to provide a more efficient and timely service. The accounts showed a financial trading loss but the figures were consistent with financial reports recorded in the minutes of the board and in the AVA's overview.

41 The review team concluded that appropriate financial regulation, management and scrutiny was in place.

Management, staffing and physical resources

42 The initial staffing structure for the open college network when it was formed reflected its location on two sites, and included some duplication of staff. Following the move to new offices in Liverpool, the structure was revised and some staff left, including the Access to HE development officer. A number of organisational changes were made in August 2007, including the reallocation of the Access to HE portfolio to the business development manager; changes to the roles of staff working in registration and awards; and the assumption of overall responsibility for finance by the Chief Executive. The resulting structure comprises three sections: Business Development, Operations, and Quality and Standards, each with a manager reporting to the Chief Executive. More recently, the Access to HE committee has approved a development whereby quality reviewers employed in the quality and standards section may also assume the role of lead moderator within the new regional Access to HE framework. The AVA

functions are therefore spread across each of these three areas rather than operated separately. The open college network's website provides up-to-date information about the staffing of the organisation, including functions and contact details for all staff. Some attention has been paid to the development of the staff of the organisation, including formal finance and accounting qualifications for some of its finance staff (see paragraph 63).

43 The open college network occupies new offices located on the outskirts of Liverpool, which it has recently purchased. However, the transfer of responsibility for Cumbria has necessitated renting some additional space to provide a presence in that part of the region.

44 The review team found the management and staffing arrangements to be appropriate to the AVA functions of the organisation. In particular, comments from providers provided reassurance that the loss of the Access to HE Development Officer post had not had any deleterious impact on the quality or timeliness of the developmental support provided by the AVA. Physical resources appear to be adequate for its needs.

Operational procedures

45 The AVA has issued an extensive range of publications relating to the development, validation and moderation of Access to HE programmes. It has also produced internal documentation relating to the procedures for registration and awards. All of these relate both to the existing programmes validated by each of its predecessor AVAs, and to newly validated programmes leading to the Access to HE Diploma, within the regional Access to HE framework (regional framework). The documentation was generally clear and appropriate for the purposes intended. However, in a small number of cases, for example, report pro formas for lead moderator initial visits and provider annual reports forms, different versions of the same document appeared to be being used. The AVA is therefore recommended to ensure consistent use of its definitive pro formas.

Data collection and management, including report to QAA

46 The AVA collects data through OPUS, the standard system used by all open college networks. It is used to register learners and award certificates and unit transcripts, and holds details of all units approved for use in the regional Access to HE framework. As noted in paragraph 35, the AVA has considered alternative arrangements should OPUS fail for any reason. Details of all units are also available to providers and others from the website.

47 Members of the review team noted some gaps in the data records of providers examined as part of the audit trails. Representatives of the AVA explained that systems of collecting data from providers had been different in each of the predecessor AVAs, but had recently been standardised, and now provided accurate and timely data for inclusion in the annual reporting to QAA. The team noted that while the AVA had experienced some difficulties in providing consolidated data from each of the predecessor AVAs in its 2005-06 annual report, no such problems appeared to have affected the data in the subsequent year, and concluded that the revised data collection systems are fit for purpose.

Communications with members

48 The main regular vehicle for communicating with providers is the Access forum, with meetings held in different parts of the AVA's region. Recent meetings have covered a range of issues, including moderation and age discrimination legislation. Representatives of providers and other stakeholders whom the review team met, reported that communications from, and with, the AVA are very good, and that this had recently mainly been focused on the development of the new regional framework, which had involved extensive and meaningful consultation. Stakeholders also reported a range of informal contact and particularly commended the AVA's fast response time to any queries. The website also provides a means whereby the AVA provides information for its members, and has a

specific section devoted to Access to HE, including developmental and regulatory matters. There are plans to develop the role of the website further. The review team concluded that communications with members were generally good on a day-to-day basis, and particularly in relation to the development of the new regional framework. However, as noted in paragraph 33, more might be done to communicate with members about the strategic direction of the AVA.

Monitoring providers

49 As part of the organisation of the AVA's new regional Access to HE framework, the AVA appoints a lead moderator for each provider. Providers prepare a document detailing their proposals for one or more Access to HE Programmes entitled a learning plan; included in this document is commitment to adhere to QAA's guidance on the admission of students and details of the provider's initial advice and guidance to students. The standard report pro forma for lead moderators includes a section on information and guidance to learners at induction. Although there is no reference to the appropriate use of the authorised QAA logo in the learning plan, it is included in the list of matters on which lead moderators are required to report, and examples of comments on this were evident in some of the audit trails. The review team was satisfied that the AVA fulfils its responsibilities in respect of monitoring the activities of providers to maintain the integrity of the Access to HE Diploma.

Procedures

50 The AVA has in place a range of policies and procedures including equal opportunities, complaints and appeals. Members of the board in particular expressed a strong commitment to equal opportunities and diversity.

51 The review team concluded that despite a range of challenges arising from the merger of two organisations, the AVA had sound management systems in place and was well aware of the issues that needed to be addressed in taking the organisation forward.

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

Approval, quality and fitness for purpose

52 The review team noted from the overview that the Open College Network North West Region had evaluated all of its systems, policies and procedures in the area of programme approval to support the 18-month development of the regional framework. The framework is intended to move all provider organisations from their current programmes to the new QAA Access to HE Diploma. A few have already made this adjustment and are running the new framework in 2007-08, but, the majority will make the transition in readiness for the 2008-09 academic year. Given this planned schedule, the team had no revalidations to appraise. Nevertheless, there were new units to be approved and these were considered within the development of the regional framework and considered by the scrutiny panels that dealt with its approval.

53 The review team confirmed, in meetings with providers and stakeholders, that extensive consultation had been undertaken with higher education institutions and Access to HE providers to determine the specification for the regional framework. The units for inclusion in the core studies and subject modules were selected for approval at several unit selection meetings held across the region. Each Access to HE provider organisation was asked to submit units for selection and these were then evaluated. The wider environment for programme development was also recognised and many of the programmes are expressly aligned to the Regional Development Agency's and the constituent Learning and Skills Councils' strategic skills priorities, thus meeting the approval of

employer groups and the providers' senior management teams.

54 The regional framework specification consists of core units and five named pathways. The pathways have within them subject modules comprising the units for that subject. There are rules of combination for each pathway. The regional framework was approved by the Access to HE committee in spring 2007. Since the QAA Access to HE Diploma regulations are now being followed by all providers in the Open College Network North West Region, the required number of credits is set at 60. Some providers and stakeholders expressed concerns about this, owing to specific discipline and professional body requirements concerning breadth and depth of the curriculum. Nevertheless, the review team was assured that all member organisations, following the 18-month period of engagement and review, had now fully accepted the Access to HE Diploma specification. The team did notice in the audit trails apparent diversions from the approved path but, on closer inspection, it was discovered that these were merely indicated additional units that learners might wish to take over and above the Diploma requirements.

55 In order to gain approval for their own particular implementation of the regional framework, provider organisations submit a learning plan (paragraph 49) which sets out the pathways that are to be delivered at their centre(s). The Learning Plan is then considered by a scrutiny panel which forwards the outcome to the Access to HE committee, where recommendations from the scrutiny panels are endorsed or amended. A scrutiny panel handbook supports this whole procedure. Since the pool of panel members, and especially experienced chairs with appropriate higher education institution or further education college experience, is small, consistency is assured and the spreading of good practice is facilitated within the approval system.

56 The review team noted that the Access to HE committee did have an appropriate process

through which conditions of approval are considered and deemed met or otherwise. However, there is no explicit requirement within the documented procedures to return such verdicts to the providers and thus provide a final sign-off for approval to run the regional framework. Although the team found no evidence of programmes operating without full approval, it recommends a revision of the procedures to make explicit the mechanisms for final sign-off of approval.

57 The review team noted that the first tranche of provider organisations was submitted under this process in April and May 2007, in readiness to begin delivery of the Diploma in September 2007. As a result of this pilot set of panels, the Open College Network North West Region was able to evaluate the process and to enhance it for the majority, currently going through a series of scrutiny panels in readiness for their planned September 2008 starts. The evaluation found that:

- the emphasis at the panel meeting had concentrated too heavily on the curriculum content and not sufficiently on the internal quality assurance systems
- the guidance to providers was unclear in places and did not support completion of the learning plan
- the level of detail required in the learning plan was too great and some subject modules were numbered rather than having a module title
- the content for some sections was unclear
- the administration of the courses offered under the regional framework needed to be made simpler yet retain the robust checking of unit combinations.

58 This evaluation was presented to the Access to HE committee and the following recommendations for changes were agreed and implemented:

- the scrutiny panel handbook has been redrafted to provide additional guidance for members and all members to be briefed prior to the panel

- the guidance for provider organisations was redrafted taking into account the recommendations for the course structure
- the detail required in the learning plan was reduced to increase flexibility.

In order to improve administration and to support course coherence, and to confirm the rules of combination are being followed, provider organisations now indicate on their learner registration form the actual unit combination being taken by learners on their course.

59 The established documentation covering the revalidation process, the learning plan template, makes it clear that the providers should include a critical review of the running of their outgoing awards. However, some of the existing operational documentation does not emphasise this requirement. It is therefore a condition of the licence that the scrutiny handbook, which contains the procedures that the Access to HE panel members follow, should be amended to ensure that the documented procedure for revalidation of the existing programmes includes a critical review prepared by the provider, and takes into account the outcomes of annual programme monitoring.

60 The review team's concerns relating to possible revalidation bottlenecks in five years' time were discussed in the meetings with senior staff and the Access to HE committee. The Open College Network North West Region has scheduled the current tranches successfully, despite some difficulties with securing an appropriate range of external panel members, and the AVA will encourage some providers to revalidate a year earlier than the maximum, to spread the load.

Development and enhancement

61 The most recent development has been the acquisition of the provision in Cumbria. The new University of Cumbria has been engaged with, both as a higher education institution and as a provider. Quality systems have been merged and training is underway to fully absorb this new partner.

62 While Access to HE has traditionally been delivered in a full-time, college-based mode, the Open College Network North West Region has for some time been developing vocational Access to HE programmes that are part-time and work-based. Two providers produced evidence of this development that was noted by the review team; indeed one of these two, a higher education institution, felt that vocational Access to HE was preferable to level zero provision linked to a Foundation Degree or an honours programme. At the other end of the provision spectrum, one provider offered fast-track awards for those seeking an intensive Access to HE experience over two months. The team found evidence that the regional framework was being implemented flexibly, to meet the needs of a range of employers, learners and provider organisations.

63 Internal organisational development and enhancement is recognised in terms of the need for staff development, both for moderators and key administrative staff. Examples cited include Chartered Institute of Management Accountants membership and ATT awards taken recently by officers responsible for financial matters. All Open College Network North West Region teams are appraised annually and a new continuing personal development/personal development programme scheme is taking shape. Staff development is focused on IT; professional development; and personal development. In addition, the quality reviewers, formerly concerned with the open college network's non-Access to HE work, have, from this session, taken up moderation responsibilities for Access to HE too. This important group has been given training so that they can embrace their new responsibilities with confidence.

64 The appointment of these quality reviewers, each with a substantial Access to HE workload, is additional evidence of development, since these individuals cover several providers each and offer opportunities to share and spread good practice observed in their regular visits to programme teams.

Evaluation and review

65 In addition to the evaluation that accompanied the transition to the Regional Framework, the AVA undertakes continuous review and appraisal of its validated awards through annual programme monitoring that takes input from providers and moderators, and incorporates learner feedback. Some of these reflective evaluative activities are formalised in the shape of Access to HE forums and provider interaction with the business development manager, now wholly devoted to the development of Access to HE. A notable feature of the review team's engagement with the AVA was its self-critical approach. This was evident from the overview and the briefing meeting with senior staff.

66 Quality evaluation requires adequate data. The relative weakness of the open college network's databases was noted in the overview. Data returns from some providers have not been appropriate, as evidenced in the audit trails, but the AVA has been proactive to bring all partners into a standard regulatory system. The audit trails highlighted several lacunae in the data record although the senior staff were keen to point out that the manner of recording in the merging open college networks was the issue, rather than that the data were absent. The inconsistent past record also reflects some loss of files in the move to the single office in Liverpool. However, the most recent cohort, as evidenced in the audit trails, shows a much improved and robust set of data returns (see paragraph 36).

67 Quality enhancement also entails appropriate and effective analysis and interpretation of data. The Chief Executive acknowledged that this was an area for improvement. The review team recommends that the AVA consider more detailed analysis and interpretation of data to contribute to more effective annual monitoring.

Principle 4

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

External moderation

68 The Open College Network North West Region has reviewed its moderation system as a result of the introduction of the Access to HE Diploma and the approval of the regional framework. The new procedures were considered and approved by the Access to HE committee. A number of providers are using the new policies and procedures which will come into operation fully from September 2008 when all provider organisations have migrated their provision into the new regional framework.

69 At the time of the review, the Open College Network North West Region's providers were offering either programmes within the new regional framework or specific or general Access to HE programmes. For the new regional framework, which all providers will be offering from September 2008, external moderation is provided by a combination of lead moderators (some of whom are Open College Network North West Region quality reviewers), and pathway moderators who undertake moderation and verification of their allocated pathways. Lead moderators are responsible for managing the moderation of all the programmes being offered by an individual provider. They can also act as pathway moderators in their area of subject expertise. Lead moderators are responsible for writing the annual report to the AVA which is informed by individual pathway moderators' findings. Quality reviewers are employed by the open college network and report to the quality standards manager. They have a broader remit at provider level than external lead moderators, working with providers to develop their staff through the identification of staff development needs and development of training plans.

70 Guidance for moderators is clearly set out in the AVA's moderator guidelines and in an extensive range of specific documents relating to

moderation. This is a primary source of information on all policies and processes for both moderators and providers and includes guidance on all key processes and reports. The review team found this documentation to be well devised and clearly presented. Meetings with providers and moderators confirmed that each group found it an extremely valuable resource.

71 From discussions with external moderators and providers, and from documentary evidence, the review team concluded that the AVA's new moderation system and procedures were well designed to undertake the moderation process. However, the team could not find evidence that a systematic process existed to ensure standardisation of provision and enhancement of Access to HE in a wider sense. Discussions with moderators and quality reviewers revealed that standardisation does occur but on a somewhat ad hoc basis. However, the AVA has recognised the need for a more systematic and formal approach and is running a series of training events over the summer to coincide with the full introduction of the regional framework. The team therefore recommends that the AVA further develops and implements the planned standardisation events to enable moderators to compare standards and judgements across the AVA's Access to HE programmes.

Appointment and training of moderators

72 The process for the appointment of moderators is clear, and the role and responsibilities of moderators are made explicit from the outset, with a clear job description for each role. Quality reviewers are appointed by the Open College Network North West Region and are members of staff of the organisation and can also act as moderators. Other moderators are appointed to a 'pool' and are subsequently allocated to a course for which their curriculum expertise is appropriate. They receive a contract and details of the provider and course they will be moderating, and are required to declare to the AVA any conflict of interest which may arise. The Open College Network North West Region contracts with

moderators on an annual basis and has a comprehensive system for tracking this. The moderator contract form states that if a moderator has been appointed to a provider for four years, the AVA reviews the moderation arrangements to ensure the appointment is still appropriate, but there is no formal requirement for the term of office with any one provider to be limited to four years. A list of moderators and providers is submitted annually by the quality administrator to the Access to HE committee for approval and the review team found no instances of a moderator having served longer than four years in the same institution. The team noted that some subject areas had lacked subject-specific moderators but this was being rectified. The team also noted that there were no formal arrangements in place to avoid a reciprocal arrangement between providers with respect to the appointment of moderators. In discussions with the Access to HE committee and moderators it appeared to the team that the Open College Network North West Region was significantly reducing its number of independent moderators in favour of the Open College Network North West Region quality reviewers which may jeopardise the objective and independent nature of the moderation process. It is therefore recommended that the AVA review the systems and procedures for the selection and appointment of moderators to ensure that there is non-reciprocity, that there is sufficient subject coverage and an appropriate balance between the Open College Network North West Region quality reviewers and independent external moderators. It is a condition of the licence that the moderator contract form is amended to make explicit that moderators will not remain with a provider longer than four years.

73 The AVA clearly explains the purpose of external moderation and the work it requires of moderators through its moderator guidelines. The role of the moderator, in addition to reporting to the AVA, is to provide externality in confirming the award of the Access to HE Diploma, to confirm that the delivery and assessment of the programme is appropriate,

that all recommendations for the award of credit have been subjected to rigorous internal moderation and to make recommendations for improvement to programmes.

74 Induction and training is provided by the AVA to all lead and pathway moderators. This is comprehensive and covers QAA's new national standards for the award of the Access to HE Diploma, the aims of the regional framework, validation, report formats and the introduction of grading. In addition, moderators are required to attend an annual update session. Although the group of moderators who met with the review team did not include anyone who had been newly appointed, the moderators commended the AVA's training which, in their view, complemented the clarity and completeness of the documentation which supports moderation.

75 From meetings with moderators and members of the Access to HE committee, and from their examination of moderators' reports, the review team concluded that the AVA's moderators are well trained and supported, experienced and capable and make an important contribution to the AVA's quality assurance of Access to HE provision. The team commends the comprehensive induction and support system for moderators.

Internal moderation

76 The AVA's lead moderators and quality reviewers are tasked with monitoring and approving providers' internal moderation processes and reporting on their operation in their initial and annual reports to the AVA. These reports include:

- a review of actions taken to address previous recommendations
- judgements on the effectiveness of the internal moderation system in improving assessment and the soundness of the provider's mechanisms for keeping records
- a report on sampling and how this meets the AVA's requirements and the annual report.

The reports make a recommendation to the AVA as to whether the programme should continue to be validated by the Open College Network North West Region.

77 As part of their remit, moderators also provide advice on internal moderation to providers, with quality reviewers being involved in developing training plans with providers as required. The emphasis is on the role of internal moderation in improving standards. The review team, from evidence from the moderators' reports and discussions with moderators and providers, concluded that internal moderation processes are working efficiently and effectively.

Action and feedback to providers on the outcomes of the moderation process

78 Lead moderators provide informal verbal feedback to providers at the end of each academic year. At a formal level, lead moderator reports, informed by reports from pathway moderators, are received by the quality administrator, who summarises key issues and sends copies of moderators' reports to providers. These include the recommendations and action plans agreed by the moderators and providers.

79 A summary report, containing details of issues raised by moderators for each programme and the actions that need to be taken to address them, is submitted to the Access to HE committee by the quality administrator. The committee considers the report and endorses the proposed actions. Lead moderators and quality reviewers subsequently monitor and report on progress on these actions to the committee.

80 The review team, in meetings with the moderators and providers, noted the efficiency and effectiveness of this system with sufficient feedback being provided at both a formal and informal level to enable providers to respond in a timely manner to any issues raised.

Award and issue of certificates and diplomas

81 The Open College Network North West Region's Access to HE awards, certificates and credit transcripts have a standard format. However, the review team noted that while the QAA logo was used it was not in the specified format. It is therefore a condition of licence that the AVA ensures the correct use and format of the Access to HE logo on certificates.

82 The AVA has introduced procedures to support the new Diploma and produced a new handbook for providers. The system now has a double check to ensure that learners are on a coherent course within the regional framework that meets the rules of combination and that the recommendation for the award of credit is consistent with the registration data. Lead moderators confirm students' learning achievement by signing the completed recommendation for the award of credits forms and Access to HE award form after checking that the required number and level of credits have been achieved in the necessary units. This is also checked by the customer service team of the Open College Network North West Region team in the AVA office on receipt of the recommendation for the award of credits form before any certificates are issued to the providers for distribution to students. All students who complete the required learning achievement, as specified in the approved programme documentation, are awarded an Access to HE Diploma and credits.

Final assessment meetings

83 The locus of authority for all awards is the Access to HE committee. However, the review team noted that the terms of reference of the final assessment board and the Access to HE committee with respect to confirming the award of the Access to HE Diploma were identical. Discussions with providers and moderators revealed that the locus was indeed the Access to HE committee with the final assessment board making a recommendation of award. The team also noted that the most recent Access to HE committee meeting to

confirm awards was not quorate and business therefore had to be completed by chair's action. It is therefore recommended that the AVA review the wording of the regulations covering the role of the final award board at provider and AVA level to clarify where the final decisions of awards are made, and to ensure these can be considered at a full meeting of the relevant committee.

Audit trails

84 The review team conducted seven audit trails chosen from the 34 providers and their 52 programmes running in 2007-08; six further education colleges and one higher education institution represented the sample of the AVA's total provision. 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 Open College Network North West Region. The programmes focused on the new Diplomas and covered areas as diverse as teacher training, art and design, business, science and IT, humanities and social science, social work, and health professions. Thus the principal pathways in the new regional framework were addressed by the review team. Because of the recent merger, some of the documentation under scrutiny had originated from both of the two predecessor AVAs since the period of the paper trails extended back to the 2003-04 session.

86 The contents of each file included:

- centre application and approval documentation
- data returns to the AVA
- programme development and approval documents
- revalidation procedures (where relevant)
- programme monitoring and review procedures and pro formas
- learner feedback and evaluation

- publicity material (to indicate the AVA's ability to monitor its appropriateness and that it conforms to QAA requirements)
- internal and external moderation processes and procedures
- certification of learner achievement.

87 There were considerable gaps in the provision of annual reports and their associated data returns. On further investigation, the review team discovered that the gaps in the data were due to differences in the procedures for data capture and analysis in the predecessor AVAs. For example, two colleges provided no annual reports but had a full set of data returns. On the other hand, some colleges had a more complete record of annual monitoring reports but only the associated data report for the most recent completed session (2006-07). The trails show, overall, a patchy record of reporting in the predecessor AVAs; though since the merger, arrangements have stabilised and consequently more consistent and complete records are being kept.

88 The evidence suggests that centre approvals had been completed correctly, with some institutions providing a comprehensive correspondence to buttress the approval gained. Similarly, there is a strong and consistent record of recent programme approvals with comprehensive learning plans as required by the AVA. It was in these trails that it was noted that final sign-off of the programme after any conditions were met was not always evident. The validation reports from the Access to HE panels are succinct, with the details contained in the learning plans.

89 Lead moderators, in a few instances, were reporting on the appropriateness of publicity material, but in general this aspect of the reports was missing. Discussions with the AVA staff indicated that there were two pro formas in use, one having been trialed and improved in relation to this aspect of reporting, and this meant some confusion and incomplete reporting. However, the review team was assured that the old incomplete pro forma had been withdrawn and, from this session, all

moderators would be using the agreed paperwork that included this item within it.

90 The recording of student input into the quality cycle was incomplete with only about half of the trails showing compliance. A similar lack of consistency affects the action planning as a result of the moderation process. Some centres clearly do this activity well, but there was a paucity of evidence in many files. Although some of the requirement is met by the year-on-year reporting by external moderators, thus picking up recommended actions in the next run of the course, the lack of a template to assure this is recorded was noted by the review team.

91 Internal and external moderation reporting was largely complete. On occasion there was not clear evidence that internal moderation had been completed prior to the external, but overall this was a strong part of the quality cycle. Similarly, the record of certification was good with, in some cases, a complete record available to the review team, including all RACs.

92 The audit trails encapsulated the history leading up to the merged open college networks and the new AVA. The predecessors adopted differing approaches and reporting but the new organisation has drawn from both and is rapidly implementing procedures to give a consistent view of the quality of learning that is being offered within the regional framework.

Conclusions

93 The Open College Network North West Region has faced a number of challenges since its formation in 2005. There have been a range of legal, governance, management and organisational matters associated with the merger of two organisations with which it had to engage in the creation of a new organisation. Its geographical reach has been extended beyond that of the two predecessor organisations, to cover the whole of the Regional Development Agency North West Region. It has made an initial application for a new AVA licence and has now had that licence

formally reviewed, and this has involved the creation and development of new or revised systems for quality enhancement and for standards in relation to Access to HE. It has developed a new regional Access to HE framework as a means for delivering the new Access to HE Diploma. In parallel with this, as a new open college network, it has been required to undergo scrutiny by National Open College Network, the other body from which it derives authority to award qualifications.

94 In meeting these challenges, the AVA has had to take some difficult decisions, for example over the location of its new offices and the appointment of staff in its new structures. It has also faced problematic trading conditions leading to some strains on the finances of the organisation, while making significant investment decisions, in particular the purchase of new premises. The transfer of responsibility for Cumbria requires further consideration, and the process of strategic planning could involve a wider range of stakeholders. In these circumstances the AVA is particularly to be commended for its open and self-critical approach to assessing its own strengths and weaknesses, which was evident from the overview document presented to the review team. Such an approach provides confidence that the AVA is able to make accurate self-assessments and implement realistic solutions to problems. However, the AVA, whilst acknowledging some of the difficulties it faces in respect of good governance, appears to be less aware of some others, in particular the need either to adhere to the requirements of its Memorandum and Articles, or to review them in the light of the experience of the past two years. In this context, in addition to addressing these issues as a condition of its licence, it may also wish to review how the board and its committees are provided with governance advice.

95 Overall, the AVA has demonstrated organisational resilience to cope well with recent challenges. It has embarked on the development of a comprehensive regional access to HE framework, which has entailed considerable

work on the part of providers, AVA staff, members of the Access to HE committee and others in a relatively short space of time. Those involved, particularly members of the Access to HE committee, appear to have relished the challenge, and the development plan is still on target for completion on time. Given the volume of work that has been undertaken, it is perhaps inevitable that a number of inconsistencies in its documentation for programme development and quality enhancement remain, for some of which attention is required as a condition of its licence, and for others is advisable, but generally its new systems appear to be becoming well embedded. Similarly, the quality of records at the provider level inherited from its predecessor organisations is variable, and there is a clear need to develop a consistent and well-administered system of provider-based records, but there is evidence that this matter is now in hand.

96 The new or revised systems and processes for securing standards are, with some exceptions, clearly described and defined and in most respects appear to be working well. 2007-08 is a transitional year, with some programmes operating under the new regional framework and leading to the Access to HE Diploma, others under the old arrangements. Under such circumstances some confusion might have been expected, but in practice the different arrangements for each appear to be well understood. The comprehensive induction and training programme for moderators is to be commended. The key remaining development needed for securing standards of students on the Diploma, the need for which the AVA is well aware, and actions towards which are in hand, is a systematic approach to standardisation across the AVA. The AVA has adopted a procedure involving a single final assessment board for the whole AVA as part of its approach to standardisation and, despite the acknowledged difficulties experienced in implementing this procedure, it plans to continue with it.

97 The AVA has progressed well since the granting of its provisional licence in 2006, and

clearly has the capacity to develop further. There are a number of strengths and a few major weaknesses. Of the four conditions, two, while important, are simple to address; the AVA is therefore ready to be granted a full licence, subject to the four conditions set out below.

Commendations

98 The AVA is commended for:

- i the industry and enthusiasm of the Access to HE committee (paragraph 25)
- ii the self-critical approach taken by Open College Network North West Region staff, as reflected in the overview document (paragraphs 36, 65)
- iii the effectiveness of the quality support systems, in particular the speedy response to queries from providers (paragraph 48)
- iv the collaborative approach taken to the development of the regional framework (paragraphs 48, 53)
- v the management of the merger of the former AVAs and the rapid development and implementation of largely effective systems and procedures (paragraph 51)
- vi the comprehensive induction and support systems for moderators (paragraph 74).

The AVA licence

Review outcome

99 The Open College Network North West Region is awarded a conditional confirmation of its full AVA licence, with four conditions to be met by 30 November 2008.

Conditions

The licence is confirmed on condition that the AVA

- i review its Memorandum and Articles of Association and revise the status of, membership criteria for, and minimum number of members of, the subcommittees of the board (paragraphs 19, 26, 27)
- ii ensure that the documented procedure for revalidation of the existing programmes includes a critical review prepared by the

- provider and takes into account the outcomes of annual programme monitoring (paragraph 59)
- iii amend the moderator contract form to make it explicit that moderators will not remain with a provider longer than four years (paragraph 72)
- iv ensure correct use and format of the QAA logo on certificates (paragraph 81).
- viii review the wording of the regulations covering the role of the final award board at provider and AVA level to clarify where the final decisions of awards are made, and to ensure these can be considered at a full meeting of the relevant committee (paragraph 83).

Recommendations to the AVA

100 The review team recommends that the AVA

- i review the means by which governance advice is received by the board and its subcommittees (paragraph 38)
- ii consider, when reviewing the strategic planning process, mechanisms for ensuring input from all stakeholders and for the development of appropriate targets and forecasts (paragraph 33)
- iii consider more detailed analysis and interpretation of data to contribute to more effective annual monitoring and strategic planning (paragraph 36)
- iv ensure consistent use of the definitive pro formas, including the annual report form and the lead moderator initial visit form (paragraph 45)
- v review the documented procedures for signing off all conditions of validation/re-validation and confirming approval to the provider (paragraphs 56, 88)
- vi develop further and implement the planned standardisation meetings to ensure that there are mechanisms to enable moderators to compare standards and judgements across the AVA programmes (paragraph 71)
- vii review the systems and procedures for the selection and appointment of moderators so as to ensure that there is non-reciprocity, that there is sufficient subject coverage and an appropriate balance between the Open College Network North West Region quality reviewers and independent external moderators (paragraph 72)

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 access recognition and licensing committee about the fitness of the AVA to continue as a licensed agency
- ii to promote public confidence in Access to HE as a properly regulated and respected route into higher education by assuring:
 - the quality and adequacy of AVAs' systems and procedures
 - the quality, comparability and range of AVAs' operations
 - the adequacy and comparability of AVAs' standards for approval, moderation and monitoring of programmes
 - consistency across AVAs in the operation of criteria for the granting of the Access to HE award
- iii to stimulate reflective and self-critical perspectives within AVAs, as an instrument to promote quality enhancement
- iv to provide an opportunity to identify and disseminate good practice of AVA operations
- v to provide a mechanism for ensuring necessary, and encouraging desirable, improvements and developments in AVAs.

The objectives of each AVA review are:

- i to examine, assess and report on:
 - the development of, and changes in, the AVA since its last review or initial licence, and its plans and targets for the future
 - the organisation's continuing viability and robustness and the ways in which the AVA demonstrates sound governance
 - the efficiency and effectiveness of the AVA's operational and quality assurance systems
 - the range and scope of the AVA's activities, and the appropriateness and value of these activities
 - the ways in which the AVA approves and monitors programmes and the ways in which these processes take account of the need for consistency and comparability
 - the ways in which the AVA satisfies itself of the adequacy and comparability of standards achieved by students gaining the Access to HE Diploma
 - 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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