



## **Agored Cymru**

Access Validating Agency relicensing review  
by the Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education

April 2012

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## About this review

This is a report of an Access Validating Agency (AVA) relicensing review conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)<sup>1</sup> at Agored Cymru (the AVA). The AVA relicensing review process is described in the *AVA relicensing: Operational description*.<sup>2</sup> Other parts of the *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education* can be found on the Access to HE website.<sup>3</sup>

The main purposes of the review were to assess the AVA's compliance with QAA's AVA licensing criteria,<sup>4</sup> and on the basis of this assessment, make a judgement about its risk level and a decision about whether its AVA licence should be renewed. These judgements were based on evidence derived from a number of sources, principally:

- documentary evidence provided by Agored Cymru
- discussions with AVA staff and members of its Board of Directors; Quality, Standards and Regulation Committee; and Access to HE Committee that met at the review visit on 26-27 April 2012
- the views of AVA stakeholders - gathered through a survey conducted by QAA - which informed the review team's analysis of documentary evidence and its agendas for face-to-face meetings.

This report:

- identifies features of good practice
- identifies required actions, where the AVA is not fully compliant with the licensing criteria
- identifies recommended actions, where the AVA can enhance its practice
- states QAA's judgement of the AVA's risk level: low, medium, high or very high (see appendix for descriptions of each category of risk)
- states QAA's AVA licensing renewal decision and any follow-up activity.

A summary of the outcomes is given in the section starting on page 2. Explanations of the outcomes are given in the section starting on page 4.

## About the AVA

Background information about Agored Cymru is given in the AVA's profile on the Access to HE website: [www.accesstohe.ac.uk](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk).

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<sup>1</sup> [www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/pages/default.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/licensing/AVARelicensingOD.pdf](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/licensing/AVARelicensingOD.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk)

<sup>4</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/licensing/criteria.pdf](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/licensing/criteria.pdf)

## Summary of outcomes

### Required actions

Agored Cymru's compliance with each of the five AVA licensing precepts at the time of the review visit is summarised below, followed by the actions QAA **required** Agored Cymru to take to achieve full compliance.

#### Governance

Agored Cymru met most of the AVA licensing criteria. Two criteria were not fully met.

To meet licensing criterion 1.10e: Put in place a clear plan to ensure that the Quality, Standards and Regulation Committee meetings achieve the quoracy requirements specified by its terms of reference on a continuing basis.

To meet licensing criterion 1.15: Revise the practices of the Quality, Standards and Regulation Committee to make clear, on a continuing basis, that its AVA responsibilities are being fully met.

#### Strategic planning

Agored Cymru met all of the AVA licensing criteria.

#### Management

Agored Cymru met nearly all of the AVA licensing criteria. One criterion was not fully met.

To meet licensing criterion 3.11: Implement a systematic procedure for monitoring the accuracy and currency of providers' published information about Access to HE.

#### Course recognition

Agored Cymru met all of the AVA licensing criteria.

#### Moderation, monitoring and certification

Agored Cymru met nearly all of the AVA licensing criteria. One criterion was not fully met.

To meet licensing criterion 5.17: Respond systematically and rigorously to issues raised in external moderator reports.

## Recommended actions

QAA **recommended** to Agored Cymru the following actions to enhance practice.

#### Governance

- Specify the total continuous term of office permitted for individual directors (licensing criterion 1.7b).
- Specify the sectoral representation of its individual directors and committee members in the membership lists and/or minutes of meetings (licensing criterion 1.10).

- Monitor the revised governance arrangements to ensure that a sufficient level of oversight of AVA matters is maintained (licensing criterion 1.11).
- Revise its style of committee minutes to provide clearer, auditable action points (licensing criterion 1.18).

### Management

- Monitor the impact of recent changes to the Access to HE staffing arrangements, taking into account the views of providers and AVA staff (licensing criterion 3.4).

### Course recognition

- Assess any changes to its quality assurance systems that may be necessary to approve, monitor and review the new single Access to HE framework, in the context of the national review by QAA of the *Access to HE Diploma and credit specifications*; and monitor the impact of the new framework (licensing criterion 4.10).

### Features of good practice

QAA identified the following **features of good practice** at Agored Cymru:

- the development, promotion and enhancement of Access to HE in collaboration with other agencies with common interests (licensing criterion 2.7)
- the expert advice offered through group events and individual discussions, which aids centres' delivery of the Access to HE Diploma and the sharing of good practice (licensing criterion 2.9)
- the Access to HE Learner of the Year award, which recognises educational achievement, distance travelled and barriers overcome and helps to promote Access to HE within Wales (licensing criterion 2.10).

<b>Risk judgement</b>	<b>AVA licence decision</b>
Agored Cymru's level of risk: <b>medium</b>	Agored Cymru's AVA licence: <b>renewed</b>
<p><b>Follow-up</b></p> <p>QAA required Agored Cymru to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• report the actions taken in response to the recommended actions in its next annual self-evaluation report</li> <li>• submit an action plan in response to the required actions by 1 October 2012</li> <li>• submit documentary evidence to demonstrate completion of the required actions by 3 December 2012.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Please note: QAA publishes changes to Agored Cymru's risk level, the current status of its licence and any required or recommended actions in the AVA profile.</b></p>	

## Explanation of the outcomes of the review

This section explains the outcomes of the relicensing review in five main sections corresponding to the five licensing precepts. Paragraph numbers and numbered references correspond to the AVA licensing criteria. A **glossary** of terms is provided on page 20.

### 1 Governance

#### Legal and constitutional arrangements

1.1 Agored Cymru's constitutional basis is set out in its Memorandum and Articles of Association. These specify its legal identity, function, aims and principal governance structures.

1.2 Agored Cymru's company objects are congruent with the aims of the *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to HE* (Recognition Scheme).

1.3 Agored Cymru's constitutional structure requires the involvement of member organisations.

1.4 Agored Cymru is not itself a provider of Access to HE courses or a receiver of Access to HE students.

1.5 Member organisations include organisations providing Access to HE courses and higher education institutions that receive Access to HE students and are subscribers to QAA.

1.6 Agored Cymru operates formal and transparent processes for approving organisations as members, and for agreeing any other formal organisational relationships.

1.7 Agored Cymru's legal identity, constitutional and governance arrangements provide formal accountability to member organisations; independent decision making and operation as an AVA; and an identified basis on which it is able to enter into legally binding agreements.

Agored Cymru has various mechanisms, including the composition and quoracy requirements of the Board and the AVA's major committees, in place (1.7b) to protect the AVA from the undue influence of any one of, or minority of, its member organisations. The effectiveness of these mechanisms has been weakened in the operation of the Quality, Standards and Regulation Committee (QSRC), however, because it has been inquorate on a number of occasions. This issue is addressed in more detail under 1.10, below, where a recommended action is provided.

Additionally, as also noted in 1.10 below, although the terms of reference for the Board's subcommittees specify a maximum term of office for members (up to three years), there is currently no limit to the number of terms that an individual director may serve on the Board beyond the standard initial period of three years, although committee protocols state that in all but exceptional circumstances members will serve on the Board for no more than two consecutive terms. Overall, the team concluded that the AVA met this criterion, but **recommends** that Agored Cymru specify the total continuous term of office permitted for individual directors.

1.8 Agored Cymru has appropriate agreements in place with the suppliers of goods or services that are integral to the operation of the AVA.

## **Governance**

1.9 Agored Cymru has clear descriptions of its governance and deliberative structures set out in its formal documentation. The terms of reference of the Board and its committees include an explicit mapping to the AVA licensing criteria.

1.10 Agored Cymru's governance structures include relevant experience and expertise in relation to governance matters. The review team had reservations about whether the current structures provided informed and considered decision making in relation to all AVA matters (see 1.11 below).

The review team noted that a matrix is appended to the terms of reference of the Board of Directors and its committees. The matrix sets out the range of essential and desirable skills, knowledge, experience and attributes expected by Agored Cymru of its Chairs and members across each part of the governance structure. AVA staff told the team that the matrix is used annually to identify and fill any gaps. The team formed the view that the matrix had the potential to be a very effective mechanism, particularly if individual directors and committee members were mapped clearly to the items in the matrix.

Agored Cymru's formal committees have clear membership specifications that detail the number of members, categories and balance of representation, and the quoracy requirements.

The Board of Directors' terms of reference specify a maximum of 21 directors. The number of directors is divided into three categories: 11 appointed, seven elected and three co-opted. Appointed directors must be external to the membership of Agored Cymru (non-members) and are appointed by the Board; elected directors are from within the membership and are elected at the AGM; co-opted directors can be either members or non-members. Quoracy is set at one third of the serving directors, the majority of whom must be 'appointed' non-member directors. Minutes of the meetings of the Board over the last two years showed an average attendance of 12 and that all meetings were quorate. However, minutes of the meeting do not record the category each director belongs to and it was unclear how the AVA monitored and recorded the aspect of the Board's quoracy that specifies the majority of attendees being non-member directors.

The terms of reference state that the Board should include members from the higher education and further education sectors, and the list of Board members confirmed this, although the list and the minutes of the Board could show the sectors represented by each director more clearly (see recommended action below).

QSRC's terms of reference specify a maximum of 10 Board members, with a minimum of six directors being from the 'appointed' category. The terms of reference state that the Committee should include members from the higher education and further education sectors, but neither the minutes nor the membership list for the Committee showed the sectoral representation of individual members. Quoracy is set at six, the majority of whom must be appointed directors. Minutes of the meetings of the QSRC for the last year showed that three of the four meetings have been inquorate. Decisions taken at the inquorate meetings were confirmed electronically afterwards by members unable to attend the meeting. Like the Board, the minutes of the meetings of QSRC do not record the categories of directors (see above) and it was again unclear how the AVA monitored and recorded the aspect of QSRC's quoracy that specifies the majority of attendees being non-member 'appointed' directors.

The Access to HE Committee's (AHEC) terms of reference specify a maximum of 15 members. Three members, including the Committee's Chair and Vice-Chair, are Board

members. Up to six members are Access to HE practitioners and a further six are from higher education. Quoracy is set at five, including one higher education representative. Both the list of AHEC members and the minutes of meetings showed clearly each member's sectoral representation. Minutes of the meetings of the AHEC over the last two years showed strong attendance and all meetings were quorate.

Further education and higher education members are represented on the Board and its committees, but this could be shown more clearly in the membership lists provided to QAA in the annual self-evaluation report and in minutes of the Board and its subcommittees, with the exception of AHEC. The review team **recommends** that the AVA specify the sectoral representation of its individual directors and committee members in the membership lists and/or minutes of meetings.

The process and criteria for the appointment or election of representatives to Agored Cymru's decision-making bodies, and the period for which they are appointed, is clear and transparent. The review team noted that individual directors from each of the three categories (see above) may be re-elected and/or reappointed after a term of three years, but that there was no limit to the number of terms they may serve (see 1.7 above).

Agored Cymru ensures vacant places on committees are filled and monitors attendance. However, as noted above, the majority of meetings of the QSRC over the last year have been inquorate. The AVA has taken steps to address this. However, the review team formed the view that the actions taken to address non-attendance at QSRC have been insufficient, especially in light of the extended remit for AVA matters that QSRC is being given (see 1.11 below). Agored Cymru is **required** by 1 December 2012 to put in place a clear plan to ensure that QSRC meetings achieve the quoracy requirements specified by its terms of reference on a continuing basis.

1.11 The Board of Directors and its committees operate according to terms of reference that detail a clear remit, responsibilities and reporting relationships through which their accountability to the organisation is defined.

Currently the Access to HE Committee reports to the Board of Directors through two routes. On matters related to the strategic development of Access to HE activity, it reports through the Chair and minutes of the Finance and General Purposes Committee; and on matters relating to quality assurance of Access to HE provision, through the Chair and minutes of QSRC.

An extensive review, involving consultation with all parts of the governance structures, was concluded recently. The outcomes were the approval of revised terms of reference for the Board and its committees and a decision to discontinue the Access to HE Committee after the annual general meeting in 2013. From that time, QSRC will be responsible for all the quality assurance functions currently delegated to the Access to HE Committee. Part of the rationale for the changes is to simplify the structure and to achieve even greater integration of Access to HE within the governance structures, reflecting a similar level of integration that now operates within the staffing structures.

The review team noted that the AVA's Executive had originally proposed an earlier date for discontinuation of the AHEC but that this had been revised due, in large part, to the concerns expressed by AHEC members. The transitional arrangement, which will also involve the Chair of QSRC attending at least one AHEC meeting, is intended to ensure that QSRC is fully prepared to take on direct responsibility for the quality assurance functions for Access to HE. It was too early to judge whether the new governance arrangements would ensure a sufficient level of oversight of AVA matters. Current indications (noted below) suggest the need for close monitoring of the effectiveness of the new arrangements. The team **recommends** that the AVA monitor the revised governance arrangements to



ensure that a sufficient level of oversight of AVA matters is maintained. A consultative Access to HE Advisory Group is also being set up to strengthen the input of Access to HE practitioners and higher education stakeholders into the AVA's strategic planning.

1.12 The Board of Directors is the ultimate authority for the AVA licence and is responsible for ensuring that the organisation meets its responsibilities as an AVA. The Board has direct responsibility for the formal approval of reports and responses to QAA in relation to the AVA licensing requirements.

1.13 The Board also has ultimate responsibility for the company's legal and financial affairs, policy development and strategic direction, and the approval and quality assurance and enhancement of the AVA's recognised Access to HE courses, monitoring and approval of academic standards, and the process for the award of Access to HE Diplomas to students.

1.14 Responsibilities are specified and appropriately located within the governance structure.

1.15 Monitoring and reporting procedures are in place through which the Board can check that delegated activities are undertaken. However, the review team noted, from minutes of QSRC, mixed evidence to demonstrate that the Committee consistently identifies key issues from - and requests further action in response to - significant quality assurance reports and papers brought to the Committee. For example, QSRC's minutes simply stated that the Committee noted the AVA's action plans for external verification, standardisation and quality review. In addition, as noted in 3.11 and 5.17 below, there have been examples of important quality and standards-related matters not being monitored rigorously enough. On this basis, the team considered that it would be difficult for the Board to assure itself that the activities delegated to QSRC for AVA matters were being properly undertaken. In the context of the changes to the governance structure noted in 1.11 above and the extended remit of the QSRC, the team concluded that the practices of QSRC needed to be revised and/or recorded more accurately to provide assurance to the Board that its AVA responsibilities are being fully met. Agored Cymru is **required** by 1 December 2012 to revise the practices of the QSRC to make clear, on a continuing basis, that its AVA responsibilities are being fully met.

1.16 The extent and limits of authority of bodies or individuals holding delegated responsibilities are defined.

1.17 The separation and links between Agored Cymru's governance and management structures are clear, and the separation is demonstrated in the AVA's operation.

1.18 Records of committees' decision making are maintained, although the review team had reservations about the usefulness of some of the minutes, particularly for purposes of demonstrating public accountability. The team noted that minutes often lacked recorded action points and it was not obvious how the committees were able to monitor progress. AVA staff who met the review team explained that target deadlines are often included in papers that go to the committees; actions resulting from meetings are usually picked up by officers, and a task management sheet is used at its Executive team meetings to monitor progress in relation to those actions. The team **recommends** that Agored Cymru revise its style of committee minutes to provide clearer, auditable action points.

1.19 Minutes of the Board are retained for the lifetime of the organisation.

## 2 Strategic planning

### Planning and monitoring

- 2.1 Agored Cymru operates a regular process for strategic planning relating to its Access to HE activity which takes account of all areas expected by this licensing criterion.
- 2.2 The AVA's strategic plan for Access to HE specifies strategic objectives, with linked operational targets, and with responsibilities assigned and deadlines set for meeting the targets.
- 2.3 The strategic objectives include objectives relating to the development, promotion and enhancement of Access to HE in Wales.
- 2.4 The strategic plan is formally approved through Agored Cymru's governance structures. Currently the Access to HE Committee has a role in the development and approval of the plan. Under the new governance arrangements, strategic planning proposals will be developed with input from the Access to HE Advisory Group and scrutinised by the Finance and General Purposes Committee before being submitted to the Board for approval.
- 2.5 The strategic plan is regularly monitored, the AVA's achievement of its strategic objectives is assessed using a risk rating system, and action is taken in light of the outcomes of the monitoring process.
- 2.6 The strategic planning process is considered through the AVA's self-assessment processes.

### Development, promotion and enhancement

- 2.7 Agored Cymru provides a focus for the development, promotion and enhancement of Access to HE provision in Wales. The review team found that the AVA is involved in a range of collaborative projects with universities, agencies and other organisations in Wales to develop, promote and enhance Access to HE provision. Agored Cymru's development, promotion and enhancement of Access to HE in collaboration with other agencies with common interests is a **feature of good practice**.
- 2.8 Agored Cymru gathers and analyses information relevant to the development, promotion and enhancement of Access to HE, and communicates its analyses to its providers and other stakeholders on a regular basis.
- 2.9 Agored Cymru provides advice on the delivery of the Access to HE Diploma to ensure that providers meet the AVA's expectations and the requirements of the *Access to Higher Education Diploma and credit specifications*; and it arranges events and opportunities for practitioners to support and develop good practice.

The review team found that Agored Cymru provides a broad range of developmental opportunities in support of providers, such as group events and individual support sessions. The AVA clearly plans a programme of opportunities but also responds to requests from its providers. The expert advice Agored Cymru offers, through group events and individual discussions, which aids centres' delivery of the Access to HE Diploma and the sharing of good practice, is a **feature of good practice**.

- 2.10 Agored Cymru promotes Access to HE through its activities and publications. The AVA introduced an Access to HE Learner of the Year financial award in 2011. A nomination and shortlisting process is in place and a selection committee, involving the Chairs of both the Board of Directors and the Access to HE Committee and the Chief

Executive, makes the final decision. Case studies of the award winners are published by the AVA. The Access to HE Learner of the Year award, which recognises educational achievement, distance travelled and barriers overcome, and helps to promote Access to HE within Wales, is a **feature of good practice**.

### **3 Management**

#### **Resources and financial management**

3.1 Agored Cymru has sufficient financial resources to exercise its AVA responsibilities in full.

3.2 Its facilities, administrative systems and allocation of funds are sufficient to manage its AVA responsibilities including, in particular, responsibilities relating to assuring the quality and standards of its recognised Access to HE provision.

3.3 It operates a responsible, systematic and rigorous approach to the management of its financial affairs.

#### **Staffing**

3.4 A long-serving Access to HE Senior Manager retired in early 2012. The AVA decided not to replace this role but to distribute the responsibilities across several other staff, thereby integrating Access to HE with the other parts of Agored Cymru's work and spreading the expertise across the organisation. In advance of the Access to HE Senior Manager's retirement, the AVA put in place measures, such as shadowing and mentoring, designed to spread expertise across the staff. While the new arrangements had only been in place for several months, the review team found one example of evidence that highlighted the need for more robust monitoring to ensure that centres' completed action plans, in response to external moderator reports, were submitted promptly. Several stakeholders, responding to the stakeholder survey conducted by QAA for this review, expressed reservations about the effectiveness of the new model of staffing. The team discussed these matters with staff and with Board and committee members during the visit. The AVA reassured the team that it was taking action to embed the new arrangements and intended to keep its staffing arrangements under review. Overall, the team concluded that the level and structure of staffing can deliver the requirements involved in the holding of an AVA licence but **recommends** that Agored Cymru put in place a plan to monitor the impact of recent changes to the Access to HE staffing arrangements, taking into account the views of providers and AVA staff.

#### **Self-assessment and risk management**

3.5 Agored Cymru has procedures for regularly monitoring and assessing the quality, effectiveness and security of its management and operations.

#### **Operations**

3.6 Minutes of committees' proceedings and other formal records are produced, are retrievable, and are held for an agreed period, although note 1.11 and 1.18 above.

3.7 The AVA develops, maintains and documents procedures, including indications of specific actions for AVA staff, in relation to key aspects of AVA operations for Access to HE to ensure that the work of the AVA is not unduly reliant on the knowledge, practices or efforts of individual staff.

3.8 Its documented operational procedures for Access to HE are clear and readily available, and include processes expected by this licensing criterion.

### **Data management and transfer**

3.9 It has adequate and effective structures and systems for collecting, recording and holding data about Access to HE providers, courses, students and awards.

### **Communications**

3.10 Agored Cymru has a range of mechanisms through which it communicates to, and gathers feedback from, member organisations and other stakeholders about matters relating to Access to HE.

3.11 Through its external moderation process, Agored Cymru has monitored providers' published information about Access to HE to verify its accuracy and currency, and consistency with QAA requirements. The review team found, however, that the new external moderator report form, approved through the committee structure, no longer includes a prompt to the moderator to report on the appropriateness of the provider's promotional and publicity material. The AVA informed the review team that the annual quality review process is now used to check the accuracy and currency of providers' published information about Access to HE. However, from the information provided, it was not evident that the accuracy and currency of providers' published information was systematically verified through this process. This licensing criterion is not therefore fully met. Agored Cymru is **required** by 1 December 2012 to implement a systematic procedure for monitoring the accuracy and currency of providers' published information about Access to HE.

3.12 The AVA makes use of the Access to HE logo in its own publications and ensures that its use of the logo is consistent with QAA's published guidance.

### **Complaints and appeals**

3.13 Agored Cymru has transparent and accessible procedures to enable complaints and appeals to be received, considered and resolved fairly, including procedures for complaints and appeals made to the AVA by students and providers that relate to its role as an awarding body.

## **4 Course recognition**

### **Diploma development (and transfer)**

4.1 Agored Cymru has a systematic and transparent approach to developing new Access to HE Diplomas (and considering requests for course transfer).

4.2 Agored Cymru considers key information at an early stage in the development of new Diplomas (or consideration of transfer requests), and confirms those areas expected by this licensing criterion.

4.3 During the development phase for a new Diploma, individuals currently delivering higher education provision in a subject relevant to the progression route(s) are involved in advising on the expectations and requirements for entry to the progression route(s) and the appropriateness of the Diploma proposals in meeting those expectations.

4.4 In considering a request by a provider for the transfer of responsibility for course recognition from another AVA, Agored Cymru formally confirms, before the transfer is agreed, those areas expected by this licensing criterion.

4.5 Agored Cymru publishes clear guidance for those involved in the development (and transfer) of Access to HE Diplomas. The guidance includes the information expected by this licensing criterion.

4.6 The AVA's guidance also includes explicit statements that the design of Diplomas should be appropriate to the primary purpose of Access to HE courses, and that Access to HE Diplomas are intended to provide a preparation for study in UK higher education but the award of a Diploma does not provide guaranteed entry to UK higher education programmes.

### **Validation processes**

4.7 The AVA operates a thorough, transparent and consistent approach to the validation of Access to HE Diplomas.

4.8 The AVA's validation process involves the scrutiny of Diploma proposals by an appointed panel, which assesses the proposals against a set of clear, standard criteria, including those listed in licensing criterion 4.10.

4.9 Both the individual units and the totality of each named Access to HE Diploma are considered as part of the Diploma validation process.

### **Validation criteria**

4.10 The AVA's validation process and criteria have ensured that for a Diploma to be recommended for approval it meets the requirements of this licensing criterion. The AVA is currently developing a new single framework for Access to HE designed to provide a more coherent and easily managed framework to respond to both the changing needs of learners wishing to progress to higher education and to higher education institutions' widening access agendas. The developments were at a fairly early stage at the time of the review visit and were taking place in the context of the national review by QAA of the *Access to HE Diploma and credit specifications*. The review team considered that, depending on the final specification of Agored Cymru's framework, the AVA's policies and procedures relating to quality assurance areas - particularly those covered under licensing precept 4 - may require revision in light of the framework. It will also be important for the AVA to monitor the impact of the changes. The review team therefore **recommends** that Agored Cymru assess any changes to its quality assurance systems that may be necessary to approve, monitor and review the new single Access to HE framework, in the context of the national review by QAA of the *Access to HE Diploma and credit specifications*; and that it monitor the impact of the new framework.

4.11 The outcomes of the validation process for each Diploma, including recommended conditions of approval and textual amendments to documentation, are recorded.

### **Validation panels**

4.12 An expert, external panel is appointed by Agored Cymru to scrutinise proposals for new, transferred or major modifications to Access to HE Diplomas.

4.13 The composition of panels ensures that panel members jointly provide current, relevant experience and expertise in the delivery and assessment of Access to HE courses; curriculum knowledge relevant to the Diploma(s) and all the units being considered; and the delivery of higher education programmes in areas indicated as intended progression routes for the Diploma(s) being considered.

4.14 The number of members and composition of validation panels for Access to HE Diplomas, and the criteria for selecting panel members, are clearly specified and consistently applied.

4.15 The Chair and members of the validation panel have no conflicts of interest in respect of the outcome of the validation event.

4.16 No more than one member of the validation panel is also represented on the body which has been designated as responsible for the approval of Diplomas within the AVA.

4.17 AVA officers attend validation events to ensure consistency of conduct, and advise the panel on the AVA's validation process and requirements, including requirements that relate to the proper application of QAA's requirements for Access to HE Diplomas.

4.18 Before the panel event, panel members are informed about their roles and responsibilities; the purpose and conduct of validation panel events; QAA's current requirements about the Access to HE Diploma; the criteria for successful validation; and the possible outcomes of the process and the post-panel process.

4.19 The panel makes a recommendation for approval, including any recommended conditions of approval, and the panel's recommendations are referred to the designated body within the organisation's governance structure for formal approval.

### **Diploma approval**

4.20 The Access to HE Committee, on behalf of QSRC, considers the validation panel report and the panel's recommendations, and confirms that the AVA's validation processes and criteria have been properly and consistently applied.

4.21 The Access to HE Committee, on behalf of QSRC, grants or withholds approval (with or without conditions) and, with regard to any conditions on the approval of a Diploma, it confirms that conditions will ensure that the Diploma meets the AVA's validation expectations; that there are clear timescales for meeting conditions; the date by which any conditions must be met; and the process for confirming that conditions have been met.

4.22 The AVA monitors whether and when conditions have been met, ensuring that the process is followed for confirming that conditions have been met.

4.23 When Agored Cymru is satisfied that the conditions have been met, the approval of an Access to HE Diploma is formally recorded, and providers wishing to deliver the Diploma are informed that it is available for delivery.

4.24 The withdrawal of approval from a Diploma before the end of its validation period is considered by the Access to HE Committee on behalf of the QSRC, with reference to standard criteria; procedures for withdrawal are applied consistently and transparently; and any necessary amendments to the Access courses database are made promptly.

4.25 The AVA holds full records of all validation and approval decisions, and it maintains definitive Diploma documentation, making amendments as necessary to reflect approved modifications.

4.26 QSRC maintains oversight of the validation and approval process and criteria and is responsible for ensuring the robustness of processes and consistency of their operation.

## **Provider/centre approval**

4.27 Agored Cymru operates a transparent, systematic and consistent approach to the approval of providers for the delivery of Access to HE courses, through which it confirms that the provider meets its criteria for centre approval.

4.28 Agored Cymru formally confirms centre approval for the delivery of named Access to HE Diplomas (or Access to HE provision) before a provider is permitted to deliver any part of any individual Access to HE Diploma.

4.29 The AVA reconsiders (and may withdraw) approval if the provider fails to continue to meet the terms of its approval. The withdrawal procedure meets the requirements of this licensing criterion.

## **Criteria for provider/centre approval**

4.30 The AVA's process and criteria for centre approval ensure that a provider that is approved to deliver an Access to HE course is located in the UK and has in place all the resources, policies, procedures and systems required by the AVA licensing criteria.

4.31 Agored Cymru's process and criteria for centre approval ensure that a provider makes an explicit commitment that it will cooperate with the AVA's moderation, monitoring and standardisation procedures.

## **Course recognition**

4.32 Agored Cymru operates a standard process to confirm that Diploma approval and centre approval has been satisfactorily completed before course recognition is confirmed.

4.33 Providers that have applied to deliver a new Diploma and have been approved to do so are notified when Diploma approval has been confirmed and informed of the date of course recognition, when delivery may start.

4.34 When the AVA has confirmed recognition of a new course, it uploads the required course information to the Access courses database; and it revises course records, as necessary, to maintain the currency of information available on databases.

## **Modifications and amendments**

4.35 Agored Cymru provides mechanisms through which providers, moderators and partner higher education institutions can suggest modifications to units or Diplomas and for those suggestions to be systematically considered.

4.36 Agored Cymru operates standard procedures for regulating modifications to units and Diplomas, and ensures that any feedback about the unit/Diploma received from providers/centres, moderators or receiving higher education institutions is taken into account.

4.37 Agored Cymru differentiates between minor and major modifications; makes clear where authority lies for making different kinds of modification or amendment; and gives an appropriate level of scrutiny to each (including full revalidation where modifications are substantial).

4.38 When minor modifications are considered (including modifications to units included in more than one Diploma), the AVA confirms that affected Diplomas will continue to comply with the AVA's validation criteria before approving the modification.

4.39 If modifications are made to a unit or Diploma that is delivered by more than one provider, all providers involved in the delivery of the unit or Diploma are informed of the amendments.

4.40 QSRC, through the Access to HE Committee, maintains oversight of the approval of unit and Diploma modifications.

### **Revalidation and confirmation of provider/centre approval**

4.41 Agored Cymru's standard validation period for Diplomas is five years from the date of initial approval, and it maintains a forward schedule of revalidation for Diplomas.

4.42 Periodic Diploma revalidation and confirmation of provider/centre approval are requirements of continued course recognition.

4.43 Agored Cymru operates a process for the periodic revalidation of Diplomas, which takes account of the areas required by this licensing criterion.

4.44 The constitution of revalidation panels is the same as for validation panels, and outcomes are confirmed by the same designated body as for Diploma approvals.

4.45 If a Diploma is to be discontinued at or before the end of its validation period, providers are informed of the final date on which new starters may be enrolled, allowing reasonable time for registered students to complete the course or transfer to another appropriate course, and arrangements are made for transfer of credit, if necessary.

4.46 When a Diploma has been revalidated, the Access courses database is updated promptly with the necessary details.

## **5 Moderation, monitoring and certification**

### **Moderation processes**

5.1 Agored Cymru maintains a system of regular external moderation, conducted by moderators appointed by the AVA, which applies to all recognised Access to HE courses.

5.2 Agored Cymru provides information about the operation of its moderation processes in guidance to moderators and to providers.

5.3 Its guidance includes clear information about all the areas expected by this licensing criterion.

5.4 Agored Cymru routinely reviews and updates its guidance to ensure its continuing currency.

### **Moderation responsibilities**

5.5 Agored Cymru's moderation and course monitoring systems and processes ensure that all the areas expected by this licensing criterion are met.

### **Moderator recruitment, selection and appointments**

5.6 It operates standard procedures, using clear and transparent criteria, for the selection and appointment of moderators, which ensure that moderators have relevant experience and relevant and current subject knowledge for their area(s) of moderating responsibility.



5.7 Where moderators are involved in moderation at subject level, they are qualified and/or experienced in teaching in the area(s) that they are responsible for moderating, at a level at or beyond that at which the subject has been taught and assessed.

5.8 Moderators are appointed by, and are directly responsible to, Agored Cymru and not a providing or receiving institution or any other body.

5.9 Contractual agreements between the moderator and the AVA set out the moderator's specific duties and term of service, and the criteria and process for termination of a moderator's employment.

5.10 Moderators are external to the providers of Access to HE courses. Agored Cymru notified QAA in December 2011 that it would be unable to achieve full compliance with part of this licensing criterion by 31 March 2012. QAA agreed to extend the date for compliance. The review team found that the AVA was making suitable progress to achieve full compliance with this licensing criterion by 1 October 2012, so that moderators will not hold a position in any receiving institution, the nature of which could create a conflict of interest or limit students' progression opportunities.

5.11 Where the moderator's role involves a direct relationship with individual Access to HE courses, the moderator's period of office for work with the individual course(s) is, in normal circumstances, no longer than four years.

5.12 The moderators involved in the moderation of any individual Access to HE course jointly provide sufficient expert moderation at the subject level for the number and range of subject areas included in the course.

### **Moderator induction and training**

5.13 Moderators receive a planned programme of mandatory induction and training, supplemented by written guidance, which enables them to carry out their role effectively.

5.14 Agored Cymru routinely updates moderators on any changes in the AVA's requirements, or changes that relate to the Access to HE Diploma.

5.15 There are mechanisms to enable moderators to compare standards and judgements across the AVA's Access to HE courses.

5.16 Agored Cymru monitors moderators' performance, and takes appropriate action if performance is deemed to be unsatisfactory.

### **Moderation reports**

5.17 Agored Cymru has procedures to ensure that action is taken in response to matters requiring action raised in moderation reports. However, the review team noted examples where the AVA had failed to take timely or rigorous action in response to issues raised by moderators. Agored Cymru is therefore **required** by 1 December 2012 to respond systematically and rigorously to issues raised in external moderator reports.

5.18 The AVA provides opportunities for centres to provide feedback to the AVA on the moderation process.

### **Course monitoring and review**

5.19 Agored Cymru monitors and reviews Access to HE courses on an annual basis, collecting information which allows it to confirm the impact, quality and standards of its

recognised Access to HE courses and to assess the effectiveness of its own quality assurance procedures.

5.20 It collects statistical data about Access to HE courses and students according to a standard set of categories, including those required for reports to QAA.

5.21 The process for course reviews, and the format for reports required by the AVA, take account of providers' own self-assessment processes and those that they undertake to report to other bodies, and draws on relevant material from the outcomes of those processes.

5.22 Course reviews allow providers to report on all Access to HE provision at the same time, but they differentiate between outcomes and distinctive features of different Diplomas that they deliver.

5.23 Providers' course reviews provide information and comment to the AVA about all of the areas expected by this licensing criterion.

5.24 Agored Cymru seeks feedback from its partner higher education institutions about the performance of Access to HE students and the appropriateness of the preparation provided by its recognised Access to HE courses.

5.25 Agored Cymru analyses, formally considers and responds to the information and feedback (including statistical information) that it gathers from providers and higher education partners.

5.26 QSRC, through the Access to HE Committee, maintains oversight of the moderation and course monitoring processes. However, as noted in 1.15 above, evidence of whether QSRC was fulfilling its delegated responsibilities was unclear.

### **Standardisation**

5.27 Agored Cymru takes steps to ensure that equivalent standards and requirements for achievement apply on different Access to HE courses which lead to Diplomas, within the AVA and across different student cohorts, with reference to the *Access to Higher Education Diploma and credit specifications* and grading requirements.

### **Award of Access to HE Diplomas**

5.28 Agored Cymru operates standard specified procedures for the award of Access to HE Diplomas to students that are consistent with the *Access to Higher Education Diploma and credit specifications*, grading requirements and assessment regulations.

5.29 It operates secure data systems which maintain records of all Access to HE awards made by the AVA.

### **Issue and dispatch of Access to HE Diplomas**

5.30 Students who have been awarded the Access to HE Diploma are issued the AVA's Access to HE Diploma, which has a standard format and which includes all the information required by QAA.

5.31 Students who have been awarded the Access to HE Diploma (or who have successfully completed units but have not achieved the requirements for the full Diploma) are issued with an achievement transcript, which has a standard format and which includes details of their successfully completed units.

5.32 Agored Cymru has a regulated process for the issue and dispatch of Access to HE Diplomas and achievement transcripts to students.

## Conclusions

The AVA is generally well managed and there are numerous areas of effective practice. Agored Cymru demonstrates good practice in its development, promotion and enhancement of Access to HE across Wales.

Agored Cymru's governance arrangements, staffing structures and Access to HE provision were in the process of significant change at the time of the review. These changes are largely being driven by a move to integrate AVA responsibilities as closely as possible with the organisation's other responsibilities, so that common structures, policies, systems and procedures can apply wherever possible.

The potential for efficiency benefits from this integration is clear. The AVA needs to ensure that the new arrangements do not result in a lack of responsiveness and that the implementation of the new systems provides appropriate rigour to AVA matters at both governance and operational levels.

The AVA has had continued difficulties with achieving quoracy at its meetings of QSRC, and there was mixed evidence at the Committee meeting of its current remit for AVA matters in full. This is despite the fact that QSRC is the senior committee for quality assurance matters and will soon assume extended responsibilities due to the decision to discontinue the Access to HE Committee. The development and introduction of a single Access to HE framework is likely to provide further challenges.

The AVA is generally managing the individual risks associated with these changes but needs to take greater account of the combined significance of the risks.

## Appendix 1: Risk judgement guidance

This guidance provides a reference point for review teams when making the risk judgement. The descriptions indicate the common characteristics of AVAs in each of the four possible categories: they are not absolute or mutually exclusive categories.

Low	Medium	High	Very high
<b>The number and overall significance of criteria that are not met</b>			
All, or nearly all, licensing criteria have been met.	Most criteria have been met, but a few criteria in key areas have not been met in full.	Many criteria have not been met <b>or</b> there are major gaps in one or more key areas of the criteria.	The AVA is evidently in serious and/or continuing breach of the licensing criteria in key respects.
<b>The level and immediacy of risk presented by unmet criteria</b>			
Unmet criteria do not, individually or collectively, present any immediate or serious risks.	Unmet criteria do not present any immediate or severe risks.  Some moderate risks may exist which, without action, could lead to serious problems over time.	Unmet criteria present serious risk(s), individually or collectively, and limited controls are in place to mitigate the risk.  Consequences of inaction in some areas may be severe.	Unmet criteria present severe risk(s), individually or collectively, to key functions.  The AVA has not taken appropriate action to mitigate risk when it has been identified.
<b>The nature of required actions that the AVA would need to take in order to meet the unmet licensing criteria</b>			
Required actions may relate, for example, to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• minor omissions or oversights</li> <li>• a need to amend or update details in documentation, where the amendment will not require or result in major structural, operational or procedural change</li> <li>• completion of activity that is</li> </ul>	Required actions may relate, for example, to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• weakness in the operation of part of the AVA's governance structure, or lack of clarity about responsibilities</li> <li>• insufficient emphasis or priority given to Access to HE in the AVA's planning processes</li> </ul>	Required actions may relate, for example, to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ineffective operation of parts of the AVA's governance structure</li> <li>• breaches by the AVA of its own financial management procedures</li> <li>• significant gaps in procedures relating to the AVA's major</li> </ul>	Major problems exist in key areas. The extent of action that would be required to meet the licensing criteria in full would require major structural or organisational change. Changes might require a staff capacity or allocation of resources that the AVA does not possess; external support to which it does not have access; or commitment to

<p>already underway in a small number of areas that will allow it to meet the licensing criteria more fully.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>quality assurance procedures which, while broadly adequate, have some shortcomings in terms of the rigour with which quality and/or standards are protected.</li> </ul>	<p>awarding body responsibilities, including for course validation, moderation, or security of certification.</p>	<p>change that it has not demonstrated.</p>
<p><b>AVA's awareness of any problems identified, and the stage it has reached in taking action to address these</b></p>			
<p>The need for action has been acknowledged by the AVA in its review documentation or during the review, <b>and</b> it has provided clear evidence of appropriate action being taken within a reasonable timescale.</p> <p>There is evidence that the AVA is fully aware of its AVA responsibilities: previous responses to monitoring outcomes provide confidence that areas of weakness will be addressed promptly and professionally.</p>	<p>Plans that the AVA presents for addressing identified problems before or at the review are under-developed or not fully embedded in the AVA's operational planning.</p> <p>The AVA's priorities or recent actions suggest that it may not be fully aware of the significance of certain licensing criteria. However, previous responses to monitoring outcomes suggest that it will take the required actions and provided evidence of action as requested.</p>	<p>Plans for addressing identified problems that the AVA may present before or at the review are not adequate to rectify the problems, or there is little or no evidence of actual progress.</p> <p>The AVA may have limited understanding of the responsibilities associated with one or more key areas of the AVA licensing criteria, or may not be fully in control of all parts of its operation.</p>	<p>The AVA has not recognised that it has major problems, or has not planned significant action to address problems it has identified.</p> <p>The AVA is unaware of, or not in full control of, one or more of its major responsibilities.</p> <p>The AVA has repeatedly or persistently failed to take appropriate action in response to previous monitoring outcomes.</p>

## Glossary

This glossary is a quick-reference guide to key terms in this report that may be unfamiliar to some readers.

**academic standards** The standards set and maintained by AVAs for their courses and expected for their awards. See also **learning outcome**, **level descriptor** and **grade descriptor**.

**Access Recognition and Licensing Committee** Committee appointed by the QAA Board to have responsibility for the **Recognition Scheme**, which monitors **AVAs** via their **annual self-evaluation** reports and through the process of **relicensing review**.

**Access to HE course** Course leading to the award of the **Access to HE Diploma**.

**Access to HE Diploma** Access to Higher Education Diploma: a nationally recognised qualification that is credit-based and graded in accordance with the terms of the [Access to HE Diploma and credit specifications](#)<sup>5</sup> and the standard **grading** scheme. Each Access to HE Diploma has its own approved set of units of assessment, governed by **rules of combination**.

**Access Validating Agency** See **AVA**.

**achievement transcript** See **certification**.

**annual self-evaluation reports** Reports produced every year by an AVA using its own information to assess its performance.

**audit trail** A group or sequence of documents collectively demonstrating that a particular quality assurance process has taken place.

**AVA** Abbreviation of **Access Validating Agency**, an organisation licensed by QAA to undertake the development, validation, monitoring and review of individual **Access to HE Diploma** courses and, accordingly, to award the Diploma (or, where appropriate, **credit** towards the Diploma).

**award** A qualification, or the allocation of **credit** to a student.

**awarding organisation** An organisation recognised by Ofqual to award Ofqual-regulated qualifications.

**centre** See **provider**.

**certification** Provision, to students, of a formal certificate testifying that they have been awarded the Access to HE Diploma, together with details of what they have achieved (achievement transcript). See also **precepts** and **licensing criteria**.

**course recognition** The formal approval of a specified Access to HE Diploma course which may be delivered by a particular provider/centre. For course recognition to be completed, the **AVA** confirms the course in QAA's Access courses database as a QAA-recognised Access to HE course. See also **precepts** and **licensing criteria**.

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<sup>5</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/creditspecificationsdraft06](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/creditspecificationsdraft06)

**credit(s)** A means of quantifying and recognising learning expressed as numbers of credits at a specific **level**.

**criterion-referenced assessment** An assessment of a student's work against the achievement of **learning outcomes**.

**Diploma approval** The point when, having considered the recommendations of a validation panel, an AVA formally confirms that a Diploma has met all requirements (including requirements made in conditions) and that it may be offered by the provider(s)/centre(s) that have been approved to deliver it.

**enhancement** In the context of an **AVA**: taking deliberate steps to improve practice.

**external moderation** A process, conducted by suitably qualified people not employed at the provider in question, that is intended to assure an assessment outcome is fair and reliable; that correct procedures have been followed; and that assessment criteria have been applied consistently.

**feature of good practice** A positive aspect of the way an **AVA** meets the **licensing criteria**, which may be seen as exemplary to others.

**framework** A published formal structure.

**further education (FE)** Formal learning that follows compulsory education and may take the form of A levels, NVQs or an Access to HE course. Some form of further education is normally required to qualify for entry to higher education.

**governance** The framework of formal structures and practices through which an organisation is governed, including its board of directors and committees, as specified in its relevant charter, constitution, articles or other formal documentation. See also **precepts** and **licensing criteria**.

**grade descriptors** Statements about what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate in order to achieve a particular grade for a unit of study.

**grading** Systematically ascertaining whether students have met the learning outcomes of a unit and, if so, whether they have done so at level 3 (pass), or at a sufficient standard for a merit or distinction, following the process and regulations of the Access to HE grading scheme. See [Grading scheme handbook](#).<sup>6</sup>

**learning outcome** What a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completing a process of learning, for example a particular unit of study.

**level** A way of classifying how advanced an educational course is. Further and higher education qualifications are at eight different levels. The Access to HE Diploma is a further education qualification at level 3.

**level descriptors** Statements about what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate at a particular educational **level**.

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<sup>6</sup> [www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/grading/SectionA.pdf](http://www.accesstohe.ac.uk/home/publications/grading/SectionA.pdf)

**licensing criteria** Formally stated requirements underpinning the five **precepts** that AVAs must meet in order to be licensed or relicensed by QAA (forming part of the **Recognition Scheme**).

**management** The staffing, operations, and systems and procedures in place to implement an AVA's responsibilities. See **precepts** and **licensing criteria**.

**moderation** A process intended to check that an assessment outcome is fair and reliable and that assessment criteria have been applied consistently. This may be done internally (within the organisation) or externally (see **external moderation**).

**monitoring** Checking processes on a periodic basis and recording the results in a way that can be accessed and interpreted to inform improvements. See also **precepts** and **licensing criteria**.

**National Open College Network (NOCN)** A UK awarding organisation offering **credit-based** qualifications accredited by the relevant regulatory authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland and licensing the Open College Networks (OCNs).

**OCN** Abbreviation for Open College Network, one of a number of regional organisations licensed by the **National Open College Network**.

**Ofqual** The regulator of general secondary and further education qualifications in England and of vocational qualifications at all **levels** in England and Northern Ireland. See also **awarding organisation**.

**Open College Network** See **OCN**.

**precepts** A set of five requirements that an organisation must meet, under the **QAA Recognition Scheme**, in order to hold an **AVA** licence. The five precepts are: governance; strategic planning; management; course recognition; and moderation, monitoring and certification. Each is supported by clearly defined **licensing criteria**.

**programme (of study)** An approved course of study that provides a coherent learning experience and normally leads to a qualification.

**provider or centre** An organisation that delivers recognised courses leading to the Access to HE Diploma.

**provider/centre approval** The successful outcome of the process through which an AVA approves a provider or centre to deliver one or more Access to HE Diplomas.

**QAA** The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. QAA is responsible for the national recognition and regulation of **Access to HE courses**. QAA is also responsible for reviewing and reporting on standards and quality in UK higher education.

**Recognition Scheme** The *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*, which was established by **QAA** and details the structures and means by which QAA meets its responsibilities for the **Access to HE Diploma**.

**recommended action** Something that QAA advises an **AVA** to do, in an annual monitoring report or **relicensing review** report.



**relicensing review** A process carried out by QAA to renew the right of an **AVA** to recognise courses leading to the Access to HE Diploma and award the qualification to students.

**required action** Something that an **AVA** must do in order to be licensed or relicensed by **QAA** to validate **Access to HE Diplomas**.

**revalidation** Renewal by an **AVA** of its existing or previous **validation** of a recognised Access to HE Diploma course.

**risk** The measure used by QAA in its judgements to indicate the extent to which an **AVA** meets the **licensing criteria** (classified as low, medium, high or very high).

**rules of combination** Rules defining the required achievement for individual Access to HE awards; these normally identify a particular set of approved named units that a student must complete to accumulate the required credits for the Diploma.

**self-evaluation** A document prepared by an **AVA**, and supplied to QAA, to demonstrate how the AVA judges that it is meeting the **licensing criteria**.

**standardisation** Specific measures taken by an AVA to ensure consistency in the standards and grading of student achievement in relation to the Access to HE Diploma.

**strategic planning** The systematic preparation whereby an organisation (in this context, an **AVA**), sets out to fulfil its role and the requirements placed upon it. See **precepts** and **licensing criteria**.

**transcript** A formal written statement of a student's achievement in an assessment and what grades or marks have been awarded.

**unit** A self-contained, structured course of study, with a coherent and explicit set of learning outcomes and assessment criteria.

**validation** The process of detailed scrutiny applied to a submission for a new Access to HE Diploma. It includes consideration of the individual units and the **rules of combination** that specify the required learning for the award of the Diploma. Provided the result is satisfactory, the process leads to a recommendation for formal approval of the Diploma by the **AVA**.

**validation panel** A team of experts appointed by an **AVA** to scrutinise proposals for new or existing **Access to HE Diplomas**.

**widening participation** Increasing the involvement in higher education of people from a wider range of backgrounds and circumstances.

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