

QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Section 1 Remit

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has a remit from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) to provide advice to Government about Access to HE courses. The remit is based on the need to identify Access to HE courses of an approved quality, and which maintain appropriate standards, for the purposes of public funding. QAA exercises its responsibilities in this regard through the operation of the QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Section 2 Summary

This document describes the regulatory framework through which Access to HE courses are recognised and regulated.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) licenses authorised validating agencies (AVAs) to recognise Access to HE programmes, and to award Access to HE certificates to students. They are also responsible for implementing quality assurance arrangements in relation to the quality of Access to HE provision and to standards of student achievement. The Access Recognition and Licensing Committee (ARLC), a sub-committee of the QAA Board of Directors, has responsibility for the consideration of licence applications and the award of licences to new AVAs. It is also responsible for overseeing the process of AVA review through which AVAs are periodically re-licensed, and the scrutiny of AVAs' annual reports to ensure continuing adherence to the principles of the *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland*.

The criteria applied by the ARLC in reaching its decisions about the security of an AVA licence with any applying or existing AVA are described in the *Principles and criteria for the licensing of authorised validating agencies*. The procedures for the consideration of licence applications, for the periodic review, and for the annual reporting of AVAs are described the *Operational Guidance* section of this document.

Overview

Section 1 Principles

1.1 Access to Higher Education programmes respond to the call for wider participation in higher education, and assume the need for, and desirability of, increased participation by those groups which are currently under-represented in higher education. The QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education (the Recognition Scheme) is built on the principle of extending opportunities for progression to higher education for those adults who have benefited least from their past educational experience.

1.2 The Recognition Scheme reflects the need to target and support such groups at the local level, and to provide discrete programmes of learning which are explicitly designed to address their particular needs. The Recognition Scheme therefore allows for responsiveness to the specific needs of adults and targeted groups, and to local needs and circumstances in the organisation of provision and in curriculum design. The resulting provision will inevitably be diverse, and the Recognition Scheme acknowledges both the diversity of programmes, as well as the diversity of providers engaged in this activity.

1.3 The Recognition Scheme also acknowledges that, in order to maximise the progression opportunities from Access to HE programmes, it is important to secure and demonstrate the commonality of aims and objectives of all participants; quality and fitness for purpose of programmes; comparability and appropriateness of students' experience; and consistency and equivalence of outcomes across all programmes. The Recognition Scheme provides a means to both promote and regulate the development of Access to Higher Education provision within a national framework of rigorous quality assurance which can allow diversity, flexibility and responsiveness to change.

Section 2 Aims

2.1 The QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to Higher Education aims to assure and publicly demonstrate:

- the appropriateness and adequacy of the provision as a preparation for higher education;
- the consistency of standards demanded of students for the award of the Access to HE certificate;
- the quality and comparability of Access to HE programmes in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

2.2 The Recognition Scheme aims to assure the fitness for purpose of Access to HE programmes in order to develop and enhance opportunities for the progression to higher education for those from disadvantaged and under-represented groups.

2.3 The Recognition Scheme aims to promote the national currency and credibility of the Access to HE award, while preserving the distinctive flexibility and local responsiveness of Access to HE provision.

2.4 The operation of the Recognition Scheme aims to identify and safeguard good practice in programmes, and to provide opportunities to enhance and develop the Access to HE provision.

2.5 The Recognition Scheme aims to provide public information through which the success of Access to Higher Education provision in achieving its aims can be evaluated.

Section 3 Mechanisms

3.1 In order to achieve these *Aims*, the Recognition Scheme provides:

- a robust framework which ensures that appropriate and verifiable arrangements and procedures for quality assurance are in place at every level;
- a description of the quality assurance responsibilities of those involved in the oversight, recognition and delivery of Access to HE provision;

- a set of clear expectations in relation to quality and standards, which are comparable to those operated in respect of other awards granted for similar purposes;
- an explicit statement about the student achievement required for the Access to HE certificate to be awarded;
- a detailed specification of the quality assurance mechanisms to be operated in relation to the design, development, recognition and monitoring of the quality and standards of Access to HE programmes;
- procedures through which the consistent operation of these quality assurance mechanisms and requirements can be monitored and assured;
- opportunities to develop and enhance Access to HE provision, and to recommend and promote good practice;
- the means by which data about the operation of the Recognition Scheme and about Access to HE programmes, student achievement and progression can be collected and disseminated.

Section 4 Structures and responsibilities

4.1 The framework for the recognition and quality assurance of Access to HE provision consists of three elements. Each of these elements has a specific role, as well as identified responsibilities and obligations within the Recognition Scheme:

- the central authority, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), has overall responsibility for the Recognition Scheme itself, the maintenance of its standards, and the oversight of the recognition and quality assurance of Access to HE provision through the operation of the Recognition Scheme;
- the authorised validating agencies (AVAs), licensed and monitored by QAA, are responsible for the development of Access to HE provision, the recognition of individual Access to HE programmes which lead to the nationally recognised Access to HE award, the monitoring of recognised programmes, and the award of Access to HE certificates to successful students;
- local providers are responsible for the design and delivery Access to HE programmes, subject to the guidance, regulation and monitoring of the AVA, and for the recommendation of students to the AVA for the award of Access to HE certificates.

4.2 QAA exercises its responsibilities for oversight of the Recognition Scheme through systems and procedures for the licensing and periodic review of AVAs, and the monitoring of AVA activity through the receipt of regular reports and statistical data from AVAs. These procedures involve the consideration by QAA of AVAs' structures, operational procedures and quality assurance processes. Through these mechanisms, QAA monitors, assesses and regulates the effectiveness of the AVAs in establishing and maintaining the quality of Access to HE programmes and standards of student achievement. QAA is also responsible for the collection and dissemination of data about Access to HE provision and student achievement and progression, and for producing regular reports on its own activities. The activities associated with these responsibilities are directed by a committee of the QAA Board, the Access Recognition and Licensing Committee.

4.3 Responsibility for the recognition and quality assurance of individual Access to HE programmes, and for the award of Access to HE certificates to students is devolved to a number of consortia throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland (the AVAs). The AVAs thus play a central role within the framework, acting as the awarding bodies for the Access to HE award within the Recognition Scheme. AVAs comprise both institutions that develop and deliver Access to HE programmes, principally further education colleges, and those that receive students who successfully complete Access to HE programmes, principally higher education institutions. This consortium model is intended to encourage the participation and collaboration of both sectors in the development, recognition and monitoring of Access to HE provision, while providing an explicitly external authority for the quality assurance of Access to HE programmes. Most AVAs are also Open College Networks (OCNs) and are engaged in activities relating to other types of courses, in addition to their activities in relation to Access to HE. All OCNs are subject to the regulation of the National Open College Network.

4.4 Responsibility for the delivery of Access to HE programmes and the assessment of Access to HE students rests with local providers. Most providers are engaged more widely with the delivery of a range of further education courses, although providers may also include higher education institutions,

community education providers, voluntary organisations and others. Providers are subject to review and regulation by the AVAs, in accordance with the terms of the Recognition Scheme, and the specific requirements of the AVA.

Section 5 The Access to HE award

5.1 The recognition of an Access to HE programme by a licensed AVA signifies that it has been designed to prepare mature students adequately for progress to, and success within, higher education, and has established appropriate academic standards. The achievement required by students in order to be awarded the Access to HE certificate is intended to reflect the requisite nature, volume and level of learning to prepare learners to enter into and thrive within a higher education environment.

- The nature of learning

The nature of learning required for the Access to HE award is determined by the aim to prepare students for a course in higher education, whether this is specified in general terms or with reference to a named progression route. It should encompass the acquisition of knowledge and skills necessary for successful study at HE level and should provide familiarity with subject content and methods appropriate as a preparation for further study in higher education.

- The volume of learning

The minimum volume of learning required for the Access to HE award is identified through the specification of learning achievements of the Access to HE programme, as required to prepare students for successful study at HE level. The proportion that may be achieved through class contact and private study, distance learning or accreditation of prior learning is determined at the point of recognition. Hours of study on an Access to HE programme must meet the requirements of the funding body.

- The level of learning

The level of learning required for the Access to HE award is specified through reference to the cognitive and academic skills required for successful study in higher education. This specification should be at a level that can be demonstrated as being equivalent to that of other awards accepted as entry qualifications for higher education. Although some valuable learning will take place at a lower level, evidence of the achievement of sufficient learning at a higher education entrance level must be clearly demonstrated. In this context, sufficiency is judged by the proportion of achievement at the higher level (normally 75 per cent of the benchmarked minimum) required to be certain of a student's readiness to embark on and be sustained in a course of higher education.

5.2 In responding to the diverse needs of learners, many providers will, within their Access to HE programmes, offer learners the opportunity to achieve more than this minimum. The particular criteria for the successful completion of any Access to HE programme will be clearly stated and will include the broader minimum requirements for the achievement of the Access to HE award.

5.3 All programmes provide a specification of the achievement required for the award of the Access to HE certificate. While all programme specifications must meet the common criteria given above, each programme will have its own individual specification. The adequacy of this specification is examined by the recognition panel set up by the AVA, at which external representation, including representation from higher education, is a requirement. AVAs are obliged to consider the fitness for purpose of the specification for programmes' progression route(s) and to demonstrate the means by which they achieve consistency among programmes leading to the Access to HE award. The operation of the specification is tested by the external moderator or examiner, who verifies student achievement and is accountable to the AVA. The Access to HE certificate is awarded to students who have successfully fulfilled the requirements of the programme specification which were stipulated when the programme was recognised.

5.4 AVAs which are also OCNs define successful achievement with reference to the National Open College Network's credit-based scheme. All students within these AVAs will have to achieve a nationally agreed minimum number of credits at certain levels to enable them to achieve the Access to HE award. Other AVAs which use credit as the basis for the award of the Access to HE certificate

will operate nationally-recognised principles of credit development and award to ensure compatibility with credit awarded elsewhere. Individual programme specifications may require or prohibit credit combinations with reference to their own curricular framework or intended progression route(s). There may also be other stipulations, in addition to credit regulations, to ensure the fitness for purpose of the programme for the Access to HE award.

5.5 The Access to HE award is offered to higher education institutions for the purposes of meeting their general entrance requirements. Where Access to HE programmes have been designed to meet the needs of particular higher education progression routes, they may also satisfy specific entry requirements. Where an Access programme is intended to lead to further study for a professional qualification, students are made aware of, and given the opportunity to meet, the entry requirements of the national professional body concerned.

Section 6 Quality assurance processes

The QAA, AVAs and Access to HE programme providers have particular responsibilities for quality assurance at the various stages of the Recognition Scheme. These stages are outlined below and the detailed procedures and criteria that pertain to each stage are specified in full in subsequent sections of the Recognition Scheme document.

6.1 *The consideration and approval of new licences to applicants for AVA status - (QAA)*

- specification of the criteria and procedures for the award of AVA licences
- consideration of outline applications to assess the broad appropriateness of applicants to act as AVAs and their likely impact on the framework for Access recognition
- receipt of full applications from applying bodies, demonstrating how specified criteria will be addressed
- the suitability of structures, organisational processes and quality assurance procedures for meeting the purposes of a licensed AVA assessed by licensing team appointed by QAA
- report of the licensing team submitted to QAA, and approval of licence granted or withheld
- licensing report published

6.2 *The review and re-licensing of AVAs - (QAA)*

- process and procedures for the review of AVAs specified by QAA
- analytical self-evaluation produced by the AVA, covering areas stipulated by QAA
- external reviewers selected, appointed and trained by QAA
- the AVA's structures, processes and procedures examined by a team appointed by QAA
- report on the review presented, and decision made by QAA about the terms of the renewal or withdrawal of the AVA's licence
- review report published
- the meeting of any conditions attached to re-licensing monitored by QAA

6.3 *The monitoring of AVAs - (QAA)*

- requirements for annual reports from AVAs determined by QAA
- annual reports received and scrutinised by QAA, and actions taken where necessary
- feedback provided to AVAs, recommending areas for development and commending good practice
- requirements and format for statistical data to be provided by AVAs determined by QAA
- AVA statistics received, compiled and disseminated by QAA

6.4 *The development of Access to HE provision - (AVA)*

- strategies and targets identified for the development and promotion of Access to HE provision within the AVA
- methods pursued for the improvement and enhancement of recognised Access to HE programmes within the AVA
- consultation and cooperation between the AVA's members providing Access to HE programmes and those receiving students on to higher education courses to ensure the fitness for purpose of recognised programmes

- the provision to Access to HE providers of information about changes in QAA regulations or requirements affecting Access to HE programmes
- 6.5 *The recognition of Access to HE programmes - (AVA)*
- guidance made available to providers about the established process and requirements for the recognition of Access to HE programmes
 - recognition process according to established procedures, including the scrutiny of programme documentation by a panel of cross-sector (including higher education) representatives, external to the provider
 - assessment of the programme submission against clear and transparent criteria, including the fitness of the programme for the purpose of the preparation of students for higher education, the identification of appropriate target group(s), and the specification of overall learning achievement required for the award of the Access to HE certificate
 - recommendation by the validation panel to the AVA about the recognition of the programme, with conditions/recommendations as necessary
 - monitoring of the meeting of any conditions set at the validation panel
 - formal recognition of the programme by the AVA
- 6.6 *The monitoring of Access to HE programmes and student achievements - (AVA)*
- establishment of a model of moderation and moderation arrangements through which the quality and standards of the AVA's recognised Access to HE programmes can be assured
 - description of the role, responsibilities and duties of moderators, including responsibility for the oversight of quality of programmes, assessment and standards of student achievement
 - the selection, appointment and training of moderators
 - the assessment by moderators of the delivery of programmes according to the approved programme specification
 - verification by moderators of student achievement, and approval of recommendations to the AVA for granting, deferring or withholding Access to HE certificates
 - specification by the AVA of standard requirements for the moderators' reports and their submission, to include comment on programme quality, procedures of assessment, standards of student achievement and recommendations for improved practice
 - receipt and follow-up of moderators' reports by AVA, including feedback to provider
 - the monitoring of standards of student achievement on recognised Access to HE programmes, with regard to sufficiency and consistency of outcomes
- 6.7 *The review and evaluation of Access to HE programmes - (AVA)*
- the collection, analysis and consideration of data in respect of student profile, registrations, completions, achievement, and intended destinations
 - the receipt and analysis of provider reports on Access to HE programmes
 - periodic review of the programmes by the AVA to ensure continuing fitness for purpose
 - the preparation and publication of an AVA annual report, according to QAA specification
- 6.8 *The award and issue of Access to HE certificates to students - (AVAs)*
- the specification of requirements for the presentation of students for the award of the Access to HE certificate, to include demonstration of the achievement of the specific requirements for the award of the Access to HE certificate, as stated in the approved programme documentation
 - the identification of procedures for the recommendation of students for the award of the Access to HE certificate, to include a final assessment meeting between the teaching team and moderator, at which recommendations are confirmed
 - the regulation of AVA procedures to assure accuracy and security in the award of certificates
- 6.9 *The design of Access to HE programmes - (Access to HE providers)*
- research and consultation about potential demand and HE progression opportunities
 - the design of Access programmes with reference to the AVA's guidance and regulations, including clear identification of
 - management responsibilities and arrangements within the providing institution

- target groups and methods for targeting and recruitment which are appropriate to the aim to provide increased opportunities for those from disadvantaged groups to participate in higher education
- curriculum design and content appropriate to the intended progression route(s)
- programme organisation and methods to assure the coherence of individual students' programmes of study
- teaching strategies and assessment methods appropriate to the student group and to the Access to HE award
- specification for the learning achievement required for the award of the Access to HE certificate, with reference to the Recognition Scheme specification
- methods of identifying and recording student achievement that will assure and demonstrate consistency of assessment
- required evidence of assessment that will demonstrate the standard of achievement
- methods of programme monitoring and review that will provide an evaluation of the continuing fitness for purpose of the programme

6.10 *The delivery of recognised programmes as approved by the AVA - (Access to HE providers)*

- adequate and appropriate resourcing (including staffing) of provision
- arrangements for necessary staff development and training
- effective programme management arrangements
- systems for assuring the quality of teaching and learning
- methods for assuring consistency in the assessment of, and feedback on, students' work
- methods for monitoring the adequacy of standards of student achievement
- methods for the internal review and evaluation, and development and enhancement of Access to HE programmes
- the prompt provision of an annual report of activities and statistical data, including details of student achievement, as required by the AVA
- participation in the AVA's monitoring and development processes, and compliance with the AVA's quality assurance requirements