

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

**Principles and criteria for the licensing  
of Authorised Validating Agencies**



## Preface

This section of the *Recognition Scheme* document contains the principles and criteria to which the QAA will refer when considering the fitness of a body to hold an AVA licence. The principles and criteria have been developed to provide assurance of the quality of the structures, operations and procedures of AVAs, in order to ensure that they are able to secure the quality of Access to HE provision, its continuing fitness for purpose and the sufficiency and consistency of its standards. The principles provide the context for the criteria, by supplying the fundamental objectives of AVA licensing.

The licensing criteria define the requirements for the award and renewal of AVA licences, but they may be met in different ways by different organisations. In the process for licensing and re-licensing of AVAs, QAA will consider all relevant information and circumstances in order to assess whether the criteria have been met. Organisations will be encouraged to demonstrate how, in relation to their own circumstances, they have addressed these criteria. The indicative evidence statements have been developed on the basis of existing good practice in AVAs, and are included in order to provide examples of some of the ways in which organisations may be able to demonstrate that they have met the criteria. An AVA may be able to demonstrate that it has met the criteria through alternative means. Where indicative evidence statements are provided for a particular criterion, these do not constitute a set of necessary and sufficient conditions. In some instances, where an organisation is being considered for an initial licence, such evidence will not always be available, as it will depend on some activity having taken place. An assessment of its ability to meet the criteria, will, in these instances, be based on the description of the structures, systems and processes which it intends to implement.

For the purposes of this document, the organisation to which an AVA licence is awarded by QAA is referred to as 'the AVA', irrespective of whether or not it has other responsibilities in addition to those related to Access to HE.

## The principles for the licensing and re-licensing of AVAs

- 1 The organisation has a structure which is based on a partnership of members, including institutions which provide Access to HE programmes and institutions of higher education.
- 2 The organisation has governance structures which allow it to discharge its AVA responsibilities securely.
- 3 The organisation is aware of, and in a position to meet, its legal and public obligations.
- 4 The organisation is able to manage effectively its AVA responsibilities and the structure which supports them.
- 5 The organisation is able to assure the quality and fitness for purpose of Access to HE programmes at the point at which they are granted formal recognition.
- 6 The organisation is able to safeguard the continuing quality of Access to HE programmes, and to secure the standards of achievement of students awarded the Access to HE certificate.
- 7 The organisation is underpinned by structures and processes which enable it to review, evaluate and develop the Access to HE provision for which it has responsibility.

## The criteria for the licensing and re-licensing of AVAs

### Principle 1

***The organisation has a structure which is based on a partnership of members, including institutions which provide Access to HE programmes and institutions of higher education.***

#### *Criteria*

The organisation will be able to demonstrate that:

- 1.1 it is responsible to a consortium or other structure including both institutions providing Access to HE programmes and at least two higher education institutions which receive Access to HE students;
- 1.2 the consortium or other structure itself will not be a provider of Access to HE programmes or a receiver of Access to HE students;
- 1.3 there are formal agreements between the organisation and the suppliers of any goods or services which are integral to the operation of the AVA (including where the supplier is one of its own members), which define the separation of the responsibilities, liabilities and authority of each party;
- 1.4 it has sufficient numbers of members to secure its operational viability, and the institutions in membership will be able to provide appropriate experience and expertise for sound governance and for informed decision-making in relation to Access to HE matters;
- 1.5 there is a clear and transparent process for admitting organisations into membership;

#### *Indicative evidence*

- i *there are explicit criteria for membership;*
- ii *the rights and obligations of members are specified;*
- iii *criteria for refusing, suspending or withdrawing membership status are specified*
- iv *a description of processes is readily available.*

### Principle 2

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

#### *Criteria*

The organisation will be able to demonstrate that:

- 2.1 it has a formal constitution which provides a description of its legal identity, functions, aims, and structures;
- 2.2 the constitutional arrangements and governance structures ensure that it is formally required to render itself accountable to its members, and protect the organisation from the undue influence of any one of, or a minority group of, its members;

#### *Indicative evidence*

- i *members from both the FE and HE sectors are represented within the organisation's advisory and decision-making structures;*
- 2.3 responsibilities are clearly specified within the governance structures for:
    - the oversight and effective control of legal and financial matters;

- strategic direction and policy development;
- organisational structures and management; and
- the quality assurance of Access to HE provision;

2.4 decisions about AVA matters are made by accountable and properly constituted bodies;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *decision-making structures, and reporting lines and mechanisms, within the organisation are clear;*
- ii *the remits, responsibilities and authority of all decision-making bodies are specified, and their proceedings and decisions are properly recorded;*
- iii *the membership of decision-making bodies is specified, and includes representation of the organisation's members from both providers of Access to HE programmes and representatives of higher education institutions receiving Access to HE students;*
- iv *the criteria for the appointment or election of members to decision-making bodies are clear and the process is transparent;*

2.5 where the organisation has responsibilities in addition to those related to Access to HE, there is a clearly specified locus of authority for its AVA responsibilities within its governance structures;

2.6 its major AVA responsibilities lie with the organisation itself and not with its officers or with any one of its individual members or an external body;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *responsibility for the final approval of Access to HE programmes is specifically located within the AVA's governance structures;*
- ii *responsibility for the award of Access to HE certificates to students does not lie outside the AVA;*
- iii *responsibility for taking major governance decisions is clearly specified within the remits of the organisation's principle governing body, and cannot be delegated to officers without explicit approval and monitoring by the relevant body*
- iv *the annual AVA report to QAA is formally approved by the body which holds responsibility for the AVA licence;*
- v *the extent and limits of authority of bodies holding devolved responsibilities are clearly defined in relation to AVA matters;*
- vi *there are monitoring and reporting procedures in place which ensure that any delegated activities are properly undertaken.*

### **Principle 3**

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

*Criteria*

The organisation will be able to demonstrate that:

3.1 its constitutional basis is clear and readily identifiable;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *the organisation is able to provide a convincing rationale and reason(s) for its constitutional basis;*

3.2 either its legal identity ensures that its liability exists separately from that of its individual members and their individual representatives, or it has taken steps to limit its liability and that of its individual members, so far as is possible, through insurance;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *the organisation has taken legal advice about the appropriateness of its legal identity to meet its public obligations, and has taken a well-considered decision on the basis of the advice received;*

- 3.3 there is a clearly identified basis on which it is able to enter into formal legally binding agreements;
- 3.4 either its legal status requires it to have formally regulated financial arrangements or it has established an appropriate agency arrangement through which its financial affairs are scrutinised;
- 3.5 its constitutional basis or relationship to any other organisation does not restrict the independent decision-making or operation of the AVA as specified under the terms of this licence.

#### **Principle 4**

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

##### *Criteria*

The organisation will be able to demonstrate that:

- 4.1 it has aims which are congruent with the Aims of the *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to HE*;
- 4.2 it has systematic and effective mechanisms which enable it to pursue its aims;

##### *Indicative evidence*

- i *it operates a regular strategic planning process;*
- ii *it has strategic and operational objectives which include objectives relating to the development and/or enhancement of Access to HE provision;*
- iii *it has specific targets related to meeting its declared objectives for Access to HE;*
- iv *it identifies specific actions and responsibilities to lead to the achievement of its targets;*
- v *it has the means to meet its targets;*
- vi *it has arrangements in place for monitoring, evaluating and reporting on the achievement of targets;*
- vii *policies and plans relating to Access to HE are systematically reviewed and revised, taking account of the outcomes of the monitoring process;*
- viii *its arrangements take account of, and make effective use of, the views of Access to HE programme providers and receivers of Access to HE students within the membership of the organisation;*
- ix *its staff are aware of its aims and plans, and can identify their own roles in meeting the AVA's aims;*

- 4.3 it has established procedures to review the AVA's performance in relation to its aims;

##### *Indicative evidence*

- i *it makes use of statistical and other data to review its performance;*
  - ii *it keeps explicit records of the AVA's achievement in relation to its stated objectives for the year;*
- 4.4 it operates a systematic and rigorous approach to the management of its financial affairs;

##### *Indicative evidence*

- i *it has budgeting mechanisms for forward planning in relation to expected income and projected expenditure, and which take account of the AVA's objectives and specific targets;*
- ii *there are clear processes and systems through which it records, controls and monitors financial decision-making and transactions, in respect of current and projected operational needs;*
- iii *it operates standard accounting procedures and is able to produce annual accounts appropriate for inclusion in the annual report to QAA;*

4.5 there is a level and structure of staffing and physical resources capable of delivering the requirements described in this document;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *there is an identified administrative base, and its facilities and administrative systems are sufficient to manage its operation and AVA responsibilities;*
- ii *responsibility for the effective day-to-day management and leadership of the organisation is clearly located;*
- iii *staff training and development is available to its staff;*

4.6 its staff are fully accountable to it through clear management lines;

4.7 it provides appropriate services to support its processes for the quality assurance and enhancement of Access to HE provision;

4.8 it has documented statements describing its operational procedures relating to Access to HE, including statements relating to registration of students with the AVA; the development and recognition of programmes; the receipt of moderators'/examiners' reports; and the award and issue to students of Access to HE certificates;

4.9 it has effective systems for the collection, recording and holding of data about Access to HE programmes and students, and is able to provide accurate and timely information to satisfy QAA's reporting requirements;

4.10 it communicates to its members effectively about matters relating to Access to HE;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *it has mechanisms to inform providers directly and promptly of regulatory matters relating to the design and delivery of Access to HE programmes;*
- ii *AVA policies and procedures are documented and are made widely available to its members;*
- iii *its formal aims and plans in relation to Access to HE are documented and disseminated to its members;*
- iv *it engages in activities which promote the AVA's activities and Access to HE more generally;*
- v *it disseminates regular reports on its AVA activities to its members;*

4.11 it has an approved equal opportunities policy, the implementation of which is evident in relation to its activities, processes and procedures;

4.12 it has procedures in place, which are easily understood and readily accessible, to enable complaints, grievances and appeals to be received, considered and resolved fairly;

4.13 it has procedures for monitoring and assessing the continuing quality and effectiveness of its management and operation, including consideration of potential risks to its operation, and mechanisms to ensure that appropriate action is taken;

4.14 it is able to produce an annual report on its activities and the Access to HE provision for which it has responsibility, in accordance with the requirements from QAA.

## **Principle 5**

***The organisation is able to assure the quality and fitness for purpose of Access to HE programmes to which it grants formal recognition.***

### *Criteria*

The organisation will be able to demonstrate that:

- 5.1 it operates a system of programme development which encourages providers to present programmes for recognition that are explicitly designed to prepare students from under-represented groups for study in higher education, and which meet the AVA's specific requirements;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *it has an established process to advise those developing Access to HE programmes about the AVA's requirements in relation to:*
- *the process and procedures for programme development and recognition;*
  - *the form and content for the documentation to be submitted for programme validation;*
  - *AVA policies about Access to HE programme design;*
  - *the AVA specification for the award of Access to HE certificate;*
- ii *the process for the development of Access to HE programmes involves consultation with representatives with relevant expertise working in higher education;*

- 5.2 there are standard systems and procedures for the recognition of programmes which ensure externality, objectivity and consistency of process in the consideration of Access to HE programme submissions;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *there are established criteria for the membership and composition of validation panels, to include representation of:*
- *providers of Access to HE programmes (external to those applying to deliver the programme)*
  - *receivers of Access to HE students in higher education*
  - *relevant curriculum expertise for the programme being validated;*
- ii *panel members receive programme documentation for consideration in advance of the validation panel;*
- iii *panel members are made aware of the purpose and conduct of the validation panel;*
- iv *the roles and responsibilities of panel members and any AVA officers attending a panel are made clear;*
- v *those responsible for developing the programme are not involved in the validation decision;*
- vi *the possible outcomes of a validation event are made clear to members of the panel in advance of the event;*

- 5.3 the AVA operates rigorous processes for programme recognition which ensure consistency of outcome in relation to the quality and fitness for purpose of Access to HE programmes;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *there are established and specified criteria for assessing Access to HE programme submissions which involve consideration of the programme as a preparation for study in higher education for the programme's major intended progression route(s) and target groups and, which include, specifically, the appropriateness of:*
- *the programme's aims, objectives and intended learning outcomes;*
  - *the specified target groups, and methods for targeting and recruiting those from those groups;*
  - *requirements and arrangements for admission to the programme, including pre-course guidance;*
  - *availability to students of academic and personal support;*
  - *curriculum design and content with reference to the acquisition of an appropriate balance of subject knowledge and academic skills;*
  - *programme organisation and methods to assure the coherence of individual students' programmes of study;*
  - *teaching strategies and methods of assessment;*
  - *methods for identifying and recording students' achievement;*
  - *the specification of learning requirements for the award of the Access to HE certificate;*
  - *programme management responsibilities and arrangements;*
  - *assurance by the provider of appropriate resources, facilities, staffing, and staff development where necessary;*
  - *the methods to be used for student evaluation and feedback;*

- the provider's arrangements for programme monitoring and evaluation.
  - ii there are adequate and efficient systems in place for:
    - the administration of validation panels
    - identifying the availability of potential moderator(s) prior to programme recognition;
    - recording panel outcomes;
    - clearly identifying any action to be taken, by whom and within what timescale;
    - circulating panel outcomes to panel members;
    - referring the panel's recommendation to the appropriate AVA body for formal approval;
    - monitoring and verifying the implementation of agreed actions to satisfy any conditions set by the validation panel;
    - notifying the provider of the formal approval of the programme, once any conditions have been met;
    - maintaining up-to-date records of definitive programme documentation, of all validation outcomes, including conditional validation with details of follow through to final approval;
  - iii there are rigorous and reliable mechanisms for establishing and maintaining 'GCSE-equivalence' of courses within any Access programme to be offered for admission to initial teacher training programmes in higher education
- 5.4 The recognition of an Access to HE programme is made with the full authority and approval of the AVA.

*Indicative evidence*

- i a validation panel recommends formal recognition of the programme to an appropriate body within the AVA prior to its delivery;
- ii there is a clear system for ensuring that all conditions are met prior to the delivery of a new programme.

## Principle 6

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

### Criteria

The organisation will be able to demonstrate that:

- 6.1 it has established a system of regular external programme monitoring and assessment ('moderation') through which the quality, comparability and fitness for purpose of Access to HE programmes, and the consistency and sufficiency of standards of student achievement, are assured;

*Indicative evidence*

- i it has a clearly specified definition of the function of moderation, to include maintenance and enhancement of the quality and fitness for purpose of Access to HE programmes; monitoring the student experience on the programme; verification of standards of student achievements leading to the granting of the Access to HE certificate; and overview of the conduct of assessment, ensuring fairness to students and that the validation requirements of the programme are met;
- ii moderation processes pay due regard to objectivity, impartiality, fairness and equity;
- iii the moderation process ensures that all Access to HE awards are consistent within the AVA and nationally against any approved benchmarked criteria;
- iv there is a clear specification for the operation of its process of moderation, including the purpose and number of visits, the activities to be undertaken, criteria for the sampling of evidence of student achievement, and processes for verifying and monitoring the standards achieved by students;
- v where its own process of moderation makes use of providers' internal moderation or verification procedures, there is a clear system for approving and monitoring those procedures, and the articulation between the systems of internal and external moderation is clear;

vi *where there is more than one moderator for a programme, or the organisation operates a system with different categories of moderators, the respective responsibilities of different moderators are clearly identified, and relationship between them is clearly stated;*

6.2 it has procedures that will ensure that those who act on the AVA's behalf to monitor the quality of Access to HE programmes and the standards of student achievement ('moderators') are competent to do so;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *there are clear criteria and transparent mechanisms for the selection of moderators, including appropriate expertise, curriculum knowledge and relevant experience in adult, further or higher education;*
  - ii *moderators are external to the provider and have a sufficient degree of independence from the admissions process of related programmes within any receiving institution to ensure that there is no potential conflict of interest;*
  - iii *moderators are appointed by, and responsible to, the AVA and not to a providing or receiving institution;*
  - iv *there are explicit contractual arrangements between the moderator and the AVA, which set out the moderator's duties and term of service;*
  - v *a sufficient number of moderators is appointed to give adequate and expert attention, and subject expertise to the numbers and range of curriculum studies on the Access to HE programme, and to ensure that the moderation of student achievement is thorough, rigorous and fair;*
  - vi *there is provision for the induction and training of new moderators that will enable them to carry out their role effectively, including clear guidelines detailing the nature of the AVA's moderation process; their roles and responsibilities; and the authority with which they are entitled to act;*
  - vii *there are established mechanisms to enable moderators to compare standards and judgements across different programmes;*
  - viii *there are mechanisms through which moderators are updated on any changes in AVA or national policy and practice;*
  - ix *there are mechanisms through which the AVA monitors moderators' performance, and responds appropriately where the performance is deemed to be unsatisfactory;*
  - x *there is a process through which the AVA can terminate a moderator's employment, if necessary;*
- 6.3 it makes use of the outcomes of the moderation process to improve and enhance recognised Access to HE programmes;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *there is clear guidance for moderators on the nature, structure, content, frequency and submission of moderation reports;*
  - ii *there are procedures for receiving and responding to moderation reports; processes for ensuring that tutors and heads of providing organisations receive copies of moderators' reports; and procedures for ensuring that recommendations and other matters arising from the reports are acted upon within an agreed timescale;*
  - iii *there are clear procedures for action to be taken in the event of providers failing to address issues raised in moderation or other reports to ensure that quality and standards of the programme are safeguarded, including procedures for the ultimate sanction of withdrawal of an Access to HE programme's approval;*
  - iv *the outcomes of the moderation process are analysed and reviewed by the AVA;*
- 6.4 it has specified procedures for the award of Access to HE certificates to students, according to clear criteria;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *formal authority for the award of Access to HE certificates is clearly located;*
- ii *there is clear guidance about the function and process of a final assessment meeting;*
- iii *there are effective systems and procedures to ensure consistent application of the programme specification of required learning achievement for the award of the Access to HE certificate;*

- iv *verified evidence of achievement is required before the award of the Access to HE certificates can be made;*
- v *recommendations for the award of Access to HE certificates are approved only after the process for moderation has been completed;*
- vi *all students on Access to HE programmes who complete the required learning achievement, as specified in the approved programme documentation, will be awarded Access to HE certificates by the AVA;*

6.5 it has a regulated process for the issue of Access to HE certificates to students;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *certificates have a standard format which include the specific title of the award; the name of the AVA; and the authorised Access to HE logo, including the words 'recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education';*
- ii *there are secure administrative procedures for the issue of certificates, and for recording the issue and re-issue of certificates;*
- iii *no indication of grading appears on Access to HE certificates;*
- iv *providers are able to supply to students and to higher education institutions a profile, record or transcript of student achievement relating to successful fulfilment of the criteria for the granting of the award.*

## **Principle 7**

***The organisation is underpinned by structures and processes which enable it to review, evaluate and develop the Access to HE provision for which it has responsibility.***

### *Criteria*

The organisation will be able to demonstrate that:

7.1 it has a rigorous system for the regular review and development of AVA activities and procedures, and of Access to HE provision with reference to quality and comparability of programmes and consistency of student outcomes;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *it has specified requirements for regular monitoring and self-assessment of Access to HE programmes by providers, including requirements to provide a critical appraisal of the operation of programmes which addresses:*
  - *the effectiveness of targeting in relation to recruitment;*
  - *the quality of the students' experience;*
  - *standards of student achievement;*
  - *student retention, completion and progression;*
  - *response to moderation and planned actions;*
- ii *it has mechanisms to identify matters of concern arising from moderation and review processes; to address matters identified; to stipulate those responsible for taking action; and to indicate an appropriate timescale within which such action should be taken;*
- iii *data on Access to HE programmes and students, including an appropriate cohort analysis, is formally considered within the AVA;*
- iv *it has mechanisms through which it is able to identify and disseminate good practice;*
- v *it has systems through which the AVA evaluates its own procedures;*
- vi *the outcomes of the review procedures are fed into the AVA's planning processes;*

7.2 it has a system for the periodic re-validation of programmes which assure their continuing quality and fitness for purpose;

*Indicative evidence*

- i *the process of re-validation takes account of the outcomes of the programme monitoring and review procedures.*

## **Standard conditions of approval**

The following standard conditions attached to the award of licences to an AVA require the AVA to provide an explicit written statement, which indicates that:

- 1** the AVA will conform with, and abide by, the principles and criteria and operational guidance set out in the *QAA Recognition Scheme for Access to HE to Higher Education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland* and in any other documents relating to Access to HE to HE, as published from time to time by QAA;
- 2** the AVA will follow the procedures set out in its licence application and/or those approved in subsequent submissions to QAA;
- 3** resources are available to the AVA for implementing the procedures set out in its documentation;
- 4** information about the AVA and its activities, and the Access to HE programmes which it recognises, will be provided from time to time, as requested by QAA;
- 5** the AVA will cooperate with and participate in QAA's procedures for the monitoring and review of AVAs;
- 6** the AVA will not devolve to another agency any part of those responsibilities described in its submissions and approved by QAA.