

University of Essex

NEW COURSE VALIDATION

1. Introduction to Validation

The validation process allows for a new or significantly revised course to be examined by an acknowledged group of experienced peers including University and external academics and employer representatives. Validation policies and procedures follow the principles of the QAA Quality Code for Higher Education¹ and are informed by guidance from the Council of Validating Universities².

The validation event enables a panel to evaluate the academic content, quality and fitness for purpose of the proposed course(s). The Validation Panel comprises members who are able to judge the academic integrity of the course in relation to the University's regulations and the national standards expected of the type of award, and evaluate the course in terms of its structure and content.

The purpose of the validation process for a new course is to ensure the:

- equivalence in academic standards with comparable courses across the Higher Education sector and within the University
- compatibility with the existing curriculum portfolio
- alignment with any relevant external reference points (including the QAA Quality Code and the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies)
- compliance with University academic regulations and alignment with the University's strategic plan and its supporting Education Strategy³
- provision of a high quality HE experience to students
- appropriate staffing and resourcing
- appropriateness of course documentation including handbooks

2. Proposal of new courses

Proposals for new undergraduate and postgraduate (taught and research) courses are submitted to the Partnerships Team using an outline approval form for new courses. All proposals are passed to the Dean of Partnerships for approval and reported to the Partnerships Education Committee. The purpose of the approval stage is to allow initial publicity of the award, but all references to the proposed new course, including any information given to prospective students (whether verbally or in writing), must clearly state that the proposal is still subject to validation.

The following information will be considered when approving a proposal for a new course:

- basic information such as course title, duration, delivery mode, language of delivery and assessment (for international partnerships), anticipated demand, anticipated start date and location of delivery
- outline of course aims and structure with anticipated module titles, learning, teaching and assessment strategies and credit weighting (including initial indication of whether any variation to the standard University rules of assessment will be required)
- links with existing curriculum portfolio
- responsibilities for delivery and management
- any resources required before delivery can commence, including staffing
- engagement with relevant external agencies
- financial viability
- timescale for validation
- internal partner institution authorisations

¹ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code>

² <http://www.cvu.ac.uk/>

³ <http://www.essex.ac.uk/about/strategy/>

Confirmation of approval by the Dean of Partnerships allows undergraduate course proposals to be submitted to UCAS for coding and listing in the UCAS Directory and for all undergraduate and postgraduate courses to be included in the partner institution's Higher Education prospectus, with a statement advising that the course is subject to validation. Proposed new courses that have received outline approval to proceed to publicity and validation will be reported to the Partnerships Education Committee.

3. Validation documentation

The validation documentation should provide the Validation Panel with the information they need to understand the course or courses being proposed, including how they will be taught, assessed and resourced. Panel members appreciate concise documentation, but documentation must be sufficiently detailed to allow the panel to evaluate the proposal properly.

In preparation for validation the course team is required to submit all relevant documentation to the Partnerships Team in an agreed electronic format at least four weeks in advance of the validation event. For international partnerships, all documentation should be submitted in English. A longer timescale may be required where professional or accrediting bodies are involved. A briefing pack containing relevant documentation is sent to members of the validation panel at least two weeks in advance of the event.

A validation documentation checklist outlines the requirements of what information and documents need to be submitted by the course team. For professional doctorate or postgraduate research degree provision, documentation should also cover how the course team's arrangements comply with the University's Code of Practice on Professional Doctorates and/or the University's Code of Practice on Postgraduate Research Degrees. Further details about the additional documentation requirements for the validation of Professional Doctorates and Postgraduate Research degree provision at partner institutions can be found in the validation documentation checklist.

Once the documentation has been received the Partnerships Team will compile a validation pack and distribute this electronically to all panel members. A printed version will be provided to members of the panel upon request. The validation pack will typically contain the following:

- Introduction and background to the partnership
- Agenda
- List of the Panel members
- Guidance for Panel members
- Supporting course documentation

4. Validation Panel

A Validation Panel comprises members who are able to judge the academic integrity of the course in relation to the University's regulations and the national standards expected of the type of award, and who can evaluate the course in terms of its structure and content. A variety of experience and views should be available among the Panel members.

Members will normally be dissociated from the planning and development of the course, but within the Panel as a whole there should be sufficient understanding of the subject matter and academic context to enable the Panel to make a sound judgement. Aspects such as professional body accreditation and requirements will also be taken into account.

A typical Validation Panel will include an external academic subject expert and a University academic member of staff. Where relevant there will also be a student representative, representatives from Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) and employer/industry representatives.

Panel membership is approved by the Dean of Partnerships on behalf of the Partnerships Education Committee and typically comprises:

- Dean or Deputy Dean of Partnerships, University of Essex, or nominee (Chair)
- at least one academic subject expert from outside the University and its partner institutions

employer or professional body representative (where relevant, e.g. for vocational or professional programmes)

- at least one member external to the course team concerned but internal to the partner institution
- at least one member of the University's teaching staff, where possible from a cognate discipline area
- a Partnerships Manager from the Partnerships Team (Secretary)

The University is responsible for identifying the external academic expert(s) and internal members of the validation panel. The partner institution concerned is responsible for nominating all other members of the validation panel, including the employer and/or professional body representative. These nominations should be submitted to the Partnerships Team and are subject to approval by the Dean of Partnerships.

The following criteria are normally applied to the selection of external academics to be members of validation panels. The external academic panel member:

- should be a senior academic currently employed in a substantive role at a higher education institution with degree awarding powers;
- should have relevant subject expertise and current experience of delivering provision at the same level as the course(s) being validated;
- should not be a previous student or previous member of academic staff of the University or any collaborative provision partner institution, unless at least five years have elapsed between leaving the University or partner institution and the date of the validation event;
- should not be a current or previous external examiner employed by the University to oversee provision at the University or any partner institution, unless at least five years have elapsed between ceasing employment as an external examiner and the date of the validation event;
- should not have any conflict of interest arising from links with the University or relevant partner institution, or from personal or professional relationships with members of staff or students at the University or relevant partner institution;
- should, where more than one external academic is included on the panel, be from a different institution to any other external representative.

In the absence of one or more panel members on the day of the event, the decision as to whether the validation event should proceed is at the Chair's discretion.

5. Duties of the panel

It is the duty of the Validation Panel to:

- critically examine the documentation and undertake discussion with the course team
- make a collective judgement as to the quality and standard of the courses to ensure that the award conferred by the University of Essex is of an equivalent standard to comparable awards conferred throughout Higher Education in the UK, and that UK threshold standards would be achieved
- review the quality of the learning opportunities and information that would be provided to students
- recommend to the University whether the proposed courses should be validated either conditionally or unconditionally, or should be rejected

The choice between whether to validate the course(s) with conditions and/or recommendations or reject for possible re-submission is based on:

- The magnitude of change required to reach an acceptability threshold
- The confidence the Panel has that the course team will be able to deliver the changes to reach this threshold

Guidance notes for panel members can be found on the Partnerships Team webpages.

6. Validation event

A validation event normally takes place over a half or full day depending on the size and nature of the award(s) being validated. The Chair will normally commence by:

- explaining the purpose of the event and confirming the course(s) to be considered, including exit awards and the mode(s) of study
- confirming the agenda
- introducing Panel members and explaining validation procedures and the responsibilities of the Panel
- identifying any collective or individual issues raised by Panel members in relation to the course documentation

The agenda will normally include one or more blocks of time in which the Panel may discuss the proposed course in detail with the course team, and in which the course team will have the opportunity to respond to points raised. The course team may choose to give a short presentation or introduction to the course. The Chair is responsible for highlighting positive aspects of the course and raising issues in a constructive manner. The Validation Panel should conduct its discussions in the spirit of a 'critical friend'.

After debate, it is usual for the course team to depart to allow the Panel to determine its recommendations. The Chair normally commences this meeting of the Panel by summarising the issues and the course team's responses and s/he will conclude the meeting by agreeing the outcome of the event with the Panel before inviting the course team back for verbal feedback. A unanimous decision of the Panel is required for the conclusion of the validation event.

During the concluding feedback session, the Chair will announce the outcome of the event and notify the course team of any conditions and/or recommendations that must be addressed or considered. A deadline will be set by which conditions and/or recommendations must be met and/or responded to. The Chair and Secretary will liaise to ensure that draft conditions and recommendations are circulated to the course team as soon as possible after the event.

The outcome of the event, including any conditions or recommendations made by the Panel, is formally recorded in the validation report, which is submitted to the University of Essex Partnerships Education Committee.

7. Paper-based validations

In certain exceptional circumstances, course validations may take place via a paper-based exercise without a validation event. This may take place when, for example, a new pathway is introduced on an existing course, incorporating a significant number of modules that have already been validated. The decision to proceed with a paper-based validation is taken by the Dean of Partnerships on behalf of the Partnerships Education Committee. For paper-based validations, panels are convened in the same way as for standard validation events and include external academic and employer representation.

Validation documentation is circulated to all panel members, who are normally expected to return their written comments by e-mail to the Secretary of the panel, within three weeks of receipt. The Chair will review all comments and decide, in liaison with the Secretary, whether any points need further investigation or further discussion with panel members.

When the panel's review of the validation documentation is complete, the Secretary will draft a validation report on behalf of the Chair, which will be circulated to all panel members for their approval before being passed to the course team.

8. Validation Report

The validation report summarises the Panel's conclusions and specifies any conditions and/or recommendations that are to be met or responded to before the course may commence. It is usual for

the Panel to specify the date by which the conditions and/or recommendations must be met or responded to and to recommend the period of validation, which for most courses is five years.

There are three possible outcomes from a validation event:

- **Recommendation to validate the proposed courses**, in which case no further action by the course team is required
- **Rejection of the proposed courses**, in which case no further action is required
- **Recommendation to validate the proposed courses with conditions and/or recommendations**, in which case the course team must provide the Chair with evidence, within any agreed timescales, that the conditions have been met, and must respond to any recommendations.
 - **Commendations** allow the Panel a chance to congratulate the course team on aspects of good practice.
 - **Conditions** are those issues that must be addressed to the satisfaction of the validation Panel, normally prior to a course's commencement.
 - **Recommendations** are those issues on which action is to be considered, possibly after the course has commenced.

In exceptional circumstances the report may recommend suspension of the validation process whilst the course team undertakes a major revision to the proposal.

The Validation report will be submitted to the Partnerships Education Committee to request the Committee's recommendation to Academic Quality and Standards Committee. The authority for final approval rests with the Academic Quality and Standards Committee under delegated authority from Senate.

9. Course team's response

The course team makes a formal response to the validation report, evidencing how specific conditions have been met and addressing any recommendations that were made. This response is submitted electronically to the Partnerships Team for onward submission to the validation panel Chair.

The formal response from the course team should include:

- amended documents (using tracked changes to highlight any amendments)
- a brief summary of how each condition has been met with reference to the amended documents
- how each recommendation has been considered
- any other appropriate evidence.

Any revisions and amendments to the documentation should be mapped and cross-referenced to the new documentation.

When the Chair of the validation panel is satisfied that all conditions have been met and that all recommendations have been responded to appropriately, he/she completes a sign-off sheet to confirm the validation decision.

10. Final approval

The Partnerships Education Committee considers the validation report and makes a recommendation to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee that the course(s) be validated for delivery at the partner institution for a given period of time (usually for five year), subject to any conditions contained in the report being met. The Partnerships Education Committee subsequently reports to the Academic Quality and Standards Committee when the conditions have been met.