**BRIEFING NOTE FOR CHAIRS OF VALIDATION PANELS**

* 1. Introduction

This briefing note is intended to support training sessions for Directors of Teaching and Learning (DTLs) who will chair validation events on behalf of the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Teaching and Learning). DTLs will not be able to chair a validation event until a training session has been attended. It is also advisable for new DTLs who do not have experience of the University’s validation process to ensure that they attend a validation event as a panel member at the earliest opportunity.

* 1. Overview of validation process

The validation process is the final step in the University's quality assurance mechanism before Schools are able to enrol students on a course. The validation of a course allows the University to scrutinise the proposed course in greater detail, focusing on:

* The academic coherence of the course
* The alignment of the course with national frameworks that govern standards in the Higher Education Sector;
* The likely quality of the student experience;
* Opportunities for enhancement of the University’s academic portfolio.

The involvement of fellow academic staff, both external and internal, in the process ensures that effective peer review of pedagogy takes place. Professional Services and Student Panel Members provide perspectives on course design, resourcing and the student experience.

Schools that have had course proposals approved by the University's Portfolio Approval Committee (PAC) are expected to submit those proposals to the validation process. There are several steps to this process, each with a specific function designed to support the School and to ensure that the proposal being brought before the panel is of good quality:

* + - * 1. *Identification of Chair and Secretary*

Following the initial approval from PAC, the Academic Development and Quality Enhancement Office (ADQE) will allocate a Validation Secretary to oversee the administration of the process. The ADQE Curriculum Manager will approach the PVC (Teaching and Learning) to chair validation events for new undergraduate courses, as well as postgraduate courses where there are issues requiring the oversight of a senior member of the University. However, Directors of Teaching and Learning will usually be approached with regards to chairing validation events for new postgraduate courses.

* + - * 1. *School Briefing*

The Validation Secretary will brief the School on the process, inform them of deadlines and ask for suggestions for independent academic panel members (and independent stakeholders, where appropriate). Having agreed potential dates with the Chair, the Secretary will confirm a mutually convenient date with the School.

* + - * 1. *Confirmation of Panel*

The Validation Secretary will convene the Panel and obtain approval for the Panel from the PVC (Teaching and Learning).

* + - * 1. *Validation documentation*

The Validation Secretary will take receipt of the School’s submitted documentation no later than three weeks before the event. The Secretary will then format and distribute the submission in both electronic and paper formats, at least two weeks before the validation event.

* + - * 1. *Pre-meeting of Panel*

A pre-meeting will be held at least a week before the event, to discuss issues arising from the documentation. The PVC (Teaching and Learning may attend this meeting in addition to all Panel members. External Panel members who are unable to attend will be invited to send in comments.

* + - * 1. *The Validation Event*

The Validation Event will usually last for between two to four hours. The course will either be validated, conditionally validated or rejection of the proposal.

* + - * 1. *Follow up*

The Validation Secretary will ensure that the Course Team responds to any conditions or recommendations within a stated timescale.

The timescale and required actions are further detailed in **Appendix A** of this document.

* 1. The Role of the Chair

The Chair appointed to a validation event fulfils the role of facilitator, ensuring that the prescribed University process is followed, thus ensuring that the quality of the course under scrutiny is assured. Ideally, the Chair will leave commentary on the proposals to the other members of the Validation Panel, only intervening if an important question is not otherwise raised by the Panel.

During both the pre-meeting and the event itself, the Chair will need to ensure that all participants have the opportunity to contribute to the discussion and to the questioning of the Course Team. Particular attention should be paid to the external members of the Panel, who are guests of the University, and the Student Panel Member, who may be hesitant given their lack of experience of similar events.

* 1. Participants
     + - 1. *The Course Team*

The Team should be comprised of the School staff who will attend the validation event. The School are free to choose the composition of the team with the following provisos:

* The Team should have a maximum of six members
* The Director of Teaching and Learning must be a member
* The Course Convenor must be a member

Other members of the course team may include the Head of School, the Head of Department, the Chair of the Board of Study, relevant module convenors, the School Administrator or Manager, or the Curriculum and Assessment Officer.

* + - * 1. *The Validation Panel*

The Panel comprises experienced academic and members of professional services, together with a representative of the student body. The following table provides details of the individuals required and their role in the event:

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| Role | Eligibility | Description of role |
| Panel Chair | A PVC, a Head of School or Director of Teaching and Learning, not from the owning School. | Will oversee the validation event and ensure that all elements of the process have been adhered to. |
| University of Sussex Academic | A senior academic from another School, preferably from a cognate area. | Will provide professional scrutiny and fulfil the peer review function, bringing the perspective of someone familiar with the University |
| Independent Academic | An appropriately qualified academic from a peer institution appointed by the Chair of Teaching and Learning Committee.[[1]](#footnote-1) | Will provide both professional scrutiny and externality, ensuring that the Panel has objectivity. |
| Independent Stakeholder (desirable) | Where appropriate, an external stakeholder may be included on the panel to represent the needs of employer organisations or targeted recruitment groups. | Will provide commentary on the likely employability of students on the proposed course and will be invited to comment on other areas. |
| Student Panel Member | Usually a current elected student representative from a similar course. | Will provide feedback and comments from a student perspective on all areas under discussion. |
| Professional Services Panel Member | A representative from the Careers and Employability Centre, IT Services, or the Library. | Will be able to provide commentary on the resources required and issues concerning the delivery of the course. |
| ADQE Panel Member | A manager from the ADQE Office. | Will ensure that the proposal is compliant with HE sector standard and University policy and regulations. |
| Secretary | An officer from the ADQE Office. | Will be responsible for the operation and organisation of the event. |

* 1. Preparations for the validation event
     + - 1. *Sector-relevant documentation*

Panel members will be provided with certain sector-relevant documents as standard. These are usually the Framework of Higher Education Qualifications, QAA Subject Benchmark Statements, and the QAA Master’s Degree Characteristics document. The Validation Secretary will ensure that documents are provided to all participants.

* + - * 1. *Course-related documentation*

The proposing School will produce the following documentation for the Panel to consider and discuss with the Course Team at the validation event:

* A course overview document comprising:
  + A narrative section covering the overall vision for the course now and in the future, the intended student experience and the anticipated employability of those who graduate;
  + Mapping of learning outcomes;
  + Mapping of the course’s assessment;
  + Mapping of the course’s teaching methods

The mapping of learning outcomes helps to demonstrate the academic coherence of the course and how course learning outcomes are met by students undertaking the modules available to them.

The mapping of the course’s assessment helps to demonstrate that the students are provided with a sufficiently distributed and diverse set of assessment. The map should also demonstrate how each module learning outcome is met by individual assessments.

The mapping of teaching methods will allow the Panel to visualise the pace of teaching employed across the course and the demands made upon students. The map will also help the Panel understand the resource implications of the course, in particular the demand this will make upon General Teaching Space (GTS) and space available within the School.

* A new course specification
* Specifications for new modules to be validated as part of the course
* Specifications for existing modules that will form part of the course undergoing validation (drawn from CMS, the definitive record of the approved modules)
* CVs of all staff teaching on the course
* The intended course handbook for students
* Where a distance learning course is proposed, a presentation of the virtual learning environment for the course is required, along with two fully-developed modules as exemplars
  + - * 1. *Themes to be explored*

When considering the submitted course validation, the Chair should ensure that a series of key areas are scrutinised by the Panel and discussed at both the pre-meeting and the event. The following table details each of themes to be considered:

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| Key issue | Criteria to be considered by panel |
| Academic coherence | The panel will wish to see how the structure of the course develops from the point of entry to final outcomes, demonstrating coherence in curriculum design, the pattern of teaching, learning, and assessment.  Where non-standard delivery is proposed, this should be signalled in the documentation and in the course team’s introduction at the event. The course team should also draw the panel’s attention to any operational issues identified. Where a distance learning course is proposed presentation of the virtual learning environment is needed with two fully-developed modules as exemplars. |
| Consistency of course and module outcomes with FHEQ Qualification Descriptors and Subject Benchmark Statements | The panel will wish to confirm that the course and module learning outcomes meet the FHEQ qualification descriptors (including Master’s level characteristics, where relevant), establishing the standard of student achievement.  Where appropriate (undergraduate courses and some postgraduate courses) the panel will also wish to confirm that the relevant Subject Benchmarks Statements are reflected in the course design.  The FHEQ descriptors, Master’s degree characteristics and Subject Benchmarks can be viewed on the QAA’s website. |
| Course regulations | The panel will wish to confirm that the course regulations for progression, exit awards, and final award/classification are consistent with the University’s Academic Framework.  Requests for derogation(s) from the Framework or other University regulations must be highlighted in the documentation and in the course team’s introduction at the event. |
| Teaching and Learning methods | The panel will pay close attention to the planned teaching and learning methods, with a particular emphasis on ensuring that the methods of delivery are appropriate to the intended course and module learning outcomes, the intended student cohort and are appropriately informed by and reflective of the Sussex research culture. The panel will also consider whether there are opportunities for technology-enhanced learning. |
| Assessment strategy | The panel will pay close attention to the choice of assessment modes, with particular emphasis on ensuring that the modes of assessment secure the course and module learning outcomes. The panel will expect to see an appropriate range of assessment modes and information on the timing of assessments, including opportunities for formative feedback. |
| Student experience | The panel will need to be satisfied that the course as presented will provide students with a high-quality experience. The course documentation should address how the course will enhance the employability of students, the support that students will receive (particular to the course), and how the course will develop them as individuals, linked to graduate employment or further study. |
| Resources | Resource issues are addressed, primarily, during the new course approval process, which includes the submission of a finance report as part of the School’s proposal. Nonetheless, the panel will seek to verify that all resources required to deliver the course are available (or have been identified and planned). This includes academic and administrative staffing (where relevant); IT and other technical or specialist learning resources; library; space.  Course teams will need to take particular note of any resource issues that were identified during the development process and should address these directly in the covering document.  Schools should be mindful that the validation process does not replace the Annual Planning Round in any way and so bids for additional resources should only be made through the annual planning process. |
| Impact and sustainability | The panel will wish to assure itself that the design and delivery of the course contribute positively to the development of the characteristics of a Sussex graduate as set out in the Teaching and Learning Strategy.  The panel will wish to assure itself that the course is likely to succeed, and to be sustainable over an appropriate period of time relative to the investment. In considering sustainability the panel will take account of projected recruitment, the integration of the course with other provision, and resource requirements. |

* + - * 1. *Pre-meeting*

The purpose of the pre-meeting is to enable the Panel to consider the documentation and identify any matters arising which will need consideration at the Event. The Chair will also take the opportunity to assign key issues to Panel members, for them to lead the discussion on that issue at the Event. Panel members will also be able to ask any process questions they may have, although this can be facilitated by contacting the ADQE Office in advance or arranging a briefing. Student Panel Members will be offered a briefing as a matter of course.

The ADQE Panel Member will produce a briefing matrix based on a reading of the documentation, highlighting issues that the Panel may wish to raise with the Course Team. This matrix will be used to guide the discussion at the pre-meeting.

The pre-meeting will be attended by all members of the Validation Panel. The Independent Academic and Independent Stakeholder members will be invited to submit written comments if they are unable to attend.

* 1. The validation event

The event itself will normally last between two and four hours, depending on the number of proposed courses under consideration and the complexity of the issues that require discussion. The meeting will follow a standard format:

* Private meeting of Panel
* Course Team arrival and introductory remarks from Chair
* Introduction of the proposal from the Course Team
* Discussion of the proposal
* Panel discussion in private to determine outcome
* Communication of outcome to Course Team

The Validation Secretary will record the proceedings of the Event.

* + - * 1. *Format of Validation event*

The meeting will follow a standard format:

* **Private meeting of Panel** (usually 30-45 mins)

The Chair will remind Panel members of the agenda and the process to be followed. The Chair will also confirm the issues that Panel members will lead on.

* **Course Team arrival and introductory remarks from Chair** (usually 5-10 mins)

The Course Team will then arrive at the venue. The Chair will make introductions and confirm the agenda with the Course Team.

* **Introduction of the proposal from the Course Team** (usually 5 mins)

The Course Team will be asked to give a brief verbal introduction of the course, ensuring that any deviations from standard University policy or process are highlighted for the Panel. This introduction should not take the form of a formal presentation as this will replicate the material present in the submitted documentation. This will leave more time for substantive discussion.

* **Discussion of the proposal** (usually 1-2 hours)

The Panel will then ask the Course Team questions concerning, but not limited to the categories previously indicated. This session will last at least 60 to 90 minutes but may be longer depending on the nature of the proposal.

* **Panel discussion in private to determine outcome** (usually 30 mins)

The Course Team will be asked to leave the room at this point to enable the Panel to undertake a private discussion of their findings and to determine an outcome. This discussion should take no longer than thirty minutes and the Course Team should remain nearby so as to be ready to return when asked to do so.

* **Communication of outcome to Course Team** (usually 15 mins)

The Course Team will be invited back into the room and will be informed by the Chair of the outcome of the Validation Event.

The possible outcomes are as follows:

* Approval of the proposal without amendment (validation)
* Approval of the proposal subject to specific conditions (conditional validation). *(Note: until the conditions set have been satisfied, students cannot be admitted to the course.)*
* Rejection of the proposal with advice to the Course Team as to the reasons for doing so.

The Chair will also inform the Course Team of:

* Any conditions that must be met before the granting of validation, including the dates by which they should be satisfied (normally within three weeks of the validation event).
* Any recommendations from the Panel that the School should consider in order to enhance the provision of the course
* Any commendations from the Panel arising from the identification of best practice.
  1. Completion of process

Following the event, the Validation Secretary will produce a summary report, to be approved by the Chair, which will be distributed to all participants no later than one week following the Event. This report will confirm the outcome together with any conditions (with a timescale for the required response), recommendations or commendations.

The Validation Secretary will then produce a full report, also to be approved by the Chair, which will be distributed to all participants no later than three weeks following the Event. This report will provide further detail of the discussion that took place at the event.

The Chair of the Panel will have the authority to recommend approval of the validation conditions to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) for final approval to enable the course to attain full validation status.

* 1. Common pitfalls

Chairs are asked to bear in mind the following pitfalls that can lead to validation processes going awry:

* Schools should strictly follow the stated timescale. Deviation from this puts pressure on the Panel members to scrutinise the documentation in a shorter timescale. This is clearly undesirable and likely to reflect poorly on the University if external panel members are put in this position.
* Only a single submission of documents should be allowed. Occasionally, Schools have decided that the submission needs to be altered after submissions. It is important that the School submits an accurate set of documentation at the first attempt to avoid delays to the process and to ensure that there is no confusion as to the structure and content of the course being proposed.
* The introduction given by the Course Team at the Validation Event should be restricted to an oral briefing of no more than 10 minutes. It is best practice to discourage formal presentations as in the past this has led to inconsistencies between the information contained within the documentation and the presentation. This then calls into question whether the validation is able to proceed given that the Panel will not have had time to consider the course in its newest form.
* The proposal should not duplicate the Annual Planning Round. On occasion, course documentation has included requests for new staff or resources. The Validation Panel are not empowered to respond to a request of this type. The School must be able to propose the course relying upon existing resources available to the School.
* Questions from the Panel with regards to resources will be restricted to ensuring that the School have appropriate faculty, physical space, Library and IT facilities in place to provide a good quality student experience. The new course approval process now requires new course proposals to confirm if there are resource requirements outside of normal University provision and so any such issues should be addressed at this point.
  1. Further questions

If you have further questions regarding the validation process, please feel free to contact the ADQE Curriculum Manager for guidance.

**Appendix A: Timescale and required actions for validation events**

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| Step | Activity and Actions | People | Timeline |
| 1 | Proposal is approved for validation by PAC. School should identify course convenor and team at this point and ensure familiarity with validation process. | PAC Secretary, School | Start of validation process |
| 2 | Informal briefing meeting for Course Team and ADQE. Meeting to discuss potential dates of validation event, identify at least two suggested externals (and stakeholders if appropriate) and resolve any uncertainties | Validation Secretary, Course Team | Within one month of approval at PAC |
| 3 | Agree dates for pre-meeting and validation event | Validation Secretary, Validation Chair | Within one month of approval at PAC |
| 4 | Identify Chair from pool and other panel members, obtain PVC (T&L) approval and agree participation | PVC (T&L), Validation Secretary, Validation Chair | Within one month of approval at PAC |
| 5 | Course proposal documentation to be submitted to ADQE Office by School. ADQE may return to the School with issues to be resolved before submission to panel | Validation Secretary, Course Team | At least three weeks before validation event |
| 6 | Final course documentation sent to Panel members for their consideration, along with the validation agenda | Validation Secretary, Validation Panel | At least two weeks before validation event |
| 7 | Hold pre-meeting, with briefing matrix from ADQE bought to the meeting | Validation Panel | At least one week before the event |
| 8 | Course Team will receive agenda for the Validation Event and electronic version of documentation to be used at the event. | Validation Secretary, Course Team | At least one week before validation event |
| 9 | Hold validation event. Course Team should be well briefed on proposals and prepared to introduce the course to the Panel. | Validation Panel, Course Team | By the end of February of the academic year preceding the course start to enable further development work in response to conditions, reporting to the March meeting of University Teaching and Learning Committee and informing the Student Systems Office of the outcome. |
| 10 | Summary report of event is produced and distributed to all participants. | Validation Secretary, Chair | Within one week of the validation event |
| 11 | Full report of event is produced and distributed to all participants. | Validation Secretary, Chair | Within three weeks of the validation event |
| 12 | The School should respond to any conditions set by the Panel at the earliest opportunity or take appropriate action if validation has been suspended. | Validation Secretary, Course Team  Sign-off of validation conditions by Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Teaching and Learning) | By the date set by the Panel (normally three weeks) and in all cases no later than the third week of March of preceding Academic Year |
| 13 | Inform stakeholders of final outcome | Validation Secretary, Prospectus Team, School | No later than final week of March of preceding Academic Year |

1. Proposing departments will normally be invited to recommend a minimum of two possible academics. The independent academic will not normally be the same person as the external examiner for the course and will not have held a position in connection with the University of Sussex for the previous three academic years. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)