

# VALIDATION EVENTS

## Guidance for Departments and Panel members

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Also see:

- [Benchmarking against internal and external reference points](#)

<b>Document owner</b>	Quality and Academic Development
<b>Document author</b>	Quality and Academic Development
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## Validation events: Guidance for Departments and Panel members

### 1. Introduction to Validation events

- 1.1. The purpose of validation events is 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.
- 1.2. References to departments in this guidance also refer to faculties, schools, centres or other structures appropriate to the course(s) under consideration.

### 2. The purpose of Validation events

- 2.1. The validation process allows for a new or significantly revised course to be examined by an acknowledged group of experienced peers including internal and external academics and employer representatives. Validation policies and procedures follow the principles of the QAA Quality Code for Higher Education and are informed by relevant internal and external reference points (Appendix A).
- 2.2. 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 internal academic regulations and alignment with the University's strategic plan and its supporting Education and Research Strategies<sup>1</sup>
  - provision of a high quality HE experience to students
  - appropriate staffing and resourcing
  - appropriateness of course documentation including handbooks

### 3. Validation Panel

- 3.1. 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.
- 3.2. 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 accounted for.
- 3.3. A typical Validation Panel will include an external academic subject expert and an internal academic member of staff (who hasn't been involved in the planning or development of the course). Where relevant there will also be a student representative, representatives from PSRBs<sup>2</sup> and employer/industry representatives.
- 3.4. Membership of Validation Panels are approved by the Executive or Deputy Dean for the Faculty.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.essex.ac.uk/about/strategy/>

<sup>2</sup> Professional, Statutory, and Regulatory Bodies

## **Duties of the Panel**

3.5. 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 students would be provided with
- recommend to the University whether the proposed courses should be validated either conditionally or unconditionally, or should be rejected

3.6. The choice between whether to validate the courses 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

## **Roles of the various members of the Panel**

### **3.7. An external academic expert**

Every validation event has at least one external Panel member. As an external Panel member, the role is to examine:

- the currency of the curriculum
- the appropriateness of the curriculum in relation to national benchmarks and similar provision at other HEIs
- the appropriateness of the strategy for assessment
- the quality of the student experience and information they are provided with

### **3.8. An employer representative**

Where programmes have a strong vocational focus and where work-based learning is involved, the Validation Panel should include one or more representatives from a relevant industry. As the employer representative, the role is to examine:

- the relevance of the programme to the industry
- the content to ensure it reflects its current and future needs and recognised standards
- whether the work-based learning offers appropriate experience
- whether the graduates of the programme will have the skills and knowledge that an employer would wish to see

### **3.9. Internal Panel members**

All Validation Panels include academic members of staff from other departments to that being considered. The internal Panel member isn't expected to be able to comment on subject specific content, but experience of their own faculty and department's practice in relation to learning, teaching and assessment should enable them to:

- critically evaluate the validation documentation
- identify possible issues or good practice
- comment on how the course aligns with institutional strategic developments as outlined in the Education and Research Strategies, and Curriculum Review
- comment on the appropriateness of the award in relation to national benchmarks and similar provision at the University and other HEIs
- ask questions about particular areas of responsibility or interest (for example assessment methods)
- comment on the quality of the student experience and information they would be provided with

### **3.10. A student representative**

Not all Validation Panels include a student representative, but where relevant, validation events may have a student representative Panel member. As the student representative, the role is to:

- contribute to discussions from the perspective of a student's experience
- help to ensure that the event takes due regard of student opinion

## **4. Guidance for Validation Panel Members**

4.1. Panels may find it helpful to use the checklist below to guide consideration of new course proposals. The checklist draws upon guidance in the QAA Quality Code for Higher Education.

### **Before the Validation Event**

4.2. Ensure you understand the University's procedure for validations and contact the Quality and Academic Development team in advance to clarify any aspects of the process.

4.3. Take time to read the documentation in advance and ask for any supplementary documentation or seek clarification on any points of ambiguity via the Secretary to the Validation Panel or Quality and Academic Development team well before the event.

### **At the Validation Event**

4.4. It is helpful to consider your role as a Panel member as that of a 'critical friend' who is there to discuss the proposal in detail and offer helpful suggestions to the course team, as well as pointing out potential pitfalls and problems arising from your scrutiny of the validation documentation.

4.5. Aim to foster an atmosphere of constructive critical dialogue with the team rather than one of confrontation, for example by avoiding aggressive questioning styles that put the course team on the defensive and by endeavouring to highlight any positive aspects of the proposal rather than focusing exclusively on areas of concern.

4.6. Do not leave major concerns unvoiced - it is much harder to address these after a validation event than before or during it.

4.7. External Panel members should be prepared to challenge assumptions held by the department/course team, and offer a fresh critical but constructive perspective.

4.8. Industry professional or employer representatives should offer a view on the value and relevance of the proposed programme in relation to industry, the profession and/or employer needs, and give close consideration to any work placement, work-based learning or employment-related aspects of the proposed programme.

4.9. A meeting with students is arranged wherever possible, as this helps you to form a more holistic view of the provision and allows you to ask about course delivery arrangements and learning and teaching from a student's perspective. The student experience should be a key focus of the Panel's considerations.

## **5. Guidance for Departmental / course team representatives**

5.1. The departmental/course team that meets the Panel:

- helps the Panel understand the validation documentation and gain a greater insight into the departmental ethos and approach to learning, teaching and assessment
- takes a dispassionate view of both the weaknesses and the strengths of the course(s) under review
- should be prepared to engage in constructive discussions with the Validation Panel

## 6. Validation event

- 6.1. 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
  - confirming the agenda
  - introducing Panel members
  - 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.
- 6.2. 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.
- 6.3. 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'.
- 6.4. 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.
- 6.5. 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.
- 6.6. 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 relevant University of Essex Faculty Education Committee for the opportunity to comment. Responsibility for approval rests with the Academic Quality and Standards Committee under delegated authority from Senate.

## 7. Validation report

- 7.1. 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.
- 7.2. 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. In exceptional circumstances the Panel may alternatively recommend suspending the validation process while the department undertakes a major revision to the proposal.
  - **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.
    - **Conditions** are 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.

- 7.3. The Panel may also take the opportunity to congratulate the course team on aspects of good practice by highlighting **areas for commendation**.
- 7.4. The validation panel may not set further conditions after it has reported. The Faculty Education Committee and/or Academic Quality and Standards Committee may amend the conditions set by the panel or set further conditions, but this would be unusual. In such a case, these amendments or additional conditions would over-ride the conditions set by the validation panel and the department would be obliged to adhere to them.

## **8. Department's response**

- 8.1. The department must make a formal response evidencing how specific conditions have been met. For recommendations, departments should provide a response to show how they have been considered and whether any action is being taken (with a clear rationale where the decision is made not to take any action).
- 8.2. This response has to be approved by the Chair of the Panel, Executive Dean or Deputy Dean (as agreed at or following the event) and is formally reported to the Faculty Education Committee and Academic Quality and Standards Committee.
- 8.3. Departments should include information about action taken in response to conditions and recommendations in the subsequent Annual Review of Courses report and where the conditions and/or recommendations require ongoing action then they should be included in the Annual Review of Courses action plan.
- 8.4. Not all conditions or recommendations arising from validation may be within the power of the department to action. For these University level recommendations, departments should follow the following procedure:

### **University level conditions or recommendations arising from validation events**

- 8.5. Resource-based issues arising as a result of validation events should be discussed with by the Executive Dean.
- 8.6. If a proposing department is considered to have inadequate resources, the department should bid for resources prior to the validation report going to the Faculty Education Committee and Academic Quality and Standards Committee, so that the Committee can be informed about the outcome of the bid and make a decision about whether the condition has been adequately addressed.
- 8.7. In the event that a bid for resources is not successful the department should specify to the Committee how it intends to address the issue(s) raised by the validation condition.
- 8.8. Any other University level issues should be raised with the Executive Dean in advance of the Academic Quality and Standards Committee at which the validation report is being considered. The outcome of this discussion should be appended to the validation report.

### **University level recommendations arising from validation**

- 8.9. The department should raise University level recommendations with the Executive Dean and include the outcome of these discussions in the next Annual Review of Courses report.
- 8.10. The Executive Dean will refer matters for discussion to the Faculty Steering Group and decision by USG as appropriate and inform the department, Faculty Manager and QUAD of the outcome.

## **9. Final approval**

- 9.1. The validation report, together with the department's response to the report, is circulated to members of the Faculty Education Committee (electronically if needed) for the opportunity to comment, and then submitted to Academic Quality and Standards Committee for final decision as to whether the course(s) should be validated for delivery.
- 9.2. Academic Quality and Standards Committee's decision is reported for information to Education Committee and Senate.

## Appendix A: Aspects to be explored during validation

These questions are provided as a guide only and are intended to be neither prescriptive nor exhaustive. However, Panel members may find it useful to refer to these questions when reading the documentation as a prompt for possible lines of enquiry.

### a. Rationale and Market Demand

- i. Is the proposed course compatible with the strategic mission of the University?<sup>3</sup>
- ii. Has adequate research been undertaken into likely student demand and employment prospects upon graduation?
- iii. Are predicted student numbers viable?
- iv. Is it clear how the skills and knowledge acquired during the course will be of use to students in their future careers?
- v. Are student entry profiles appropriate?
- vi. Are admissions procedures fair and transparent, including those for dealing with AP(E)L?

### b. Course Design

- i. How does the course align with the University's strategic plan and its supporting Education and Research Strategies?<sup>4</sup>
- ii. Does the course design reflect recent developments in the discipline? How has the curriculum been influenced by the research interests of the teaching team?
- iii. Is the proposed award title appropriate?
- iv. Are the aims of the course clearly defined and appropriate to the course(s)?
- v. Are there clear learning outcomes that appropriately reflect published QAA Subject Benchmark Statements, qualification benchmarks (for example for master's or foundation degrees), the Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (Qualifications Frameworks), national occupational standards and any relevant Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Body requirements?
- vi. Are you satisfied that UK threshold standards will be achieved?
- vii. Does course design take due regard for issues of equality and diversity? Does the design of the course include assessment of the extent to which the course is inclusive of disabled students?
- viii. How have employers/industry experts been involved in the development of the course(s) and what impact has this had?
- ix. For courses embedding work-based or work-related learning:
  - Is the work-based or work-related element of the programme relevant to the programme and its aims?
  - Do learning outcomes adequately demonstrate the integration of work-based or work-related learning and the academic programme of study?
  - Has there been continuing engagement with appropriate Sector Skills Councils?

### c. Curriculum

- i. Do the courses reflect changes within the department in response to the University-wide Curriculum Review?
- ii. Is each learning outcome (subject-specific or skills-related) supported by appropriate elements within the curriculum?
- iii. Is the curriculum content appropriate to each stage of the course, and to the level of the award?

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

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.essex.ac.uk/about/strategy/>

- iv. Is each course balanced, for example in terms of academic and practical elements and the breadth and depth of the curriculum? Is there a balance and integration between employment related skills and academic study?
- v. Does the design of the curriculum enable academic and intellectual progression by imposing increasing demands on the learner in terms of the acquisition of knowledge and skills, the capacity for conceptualisation, and increasing autonomy in learning?
- vi. Is work-based learning embedded in the programme of learning, and does work based learning contribute to the overall coherence and integrity of the course?

**d. Assessment**

- i. Do assessment methods support learning? Are they appropriate, sufficiently varied and inclusive? Is the balance of coursework and examinations across the course appropriate?
- ii. What innovations in assessment methods are under consideration or have recently been introduced?
- iii. Is the assessment strategy adequately responsive to the varying needs and backgrounds of students (e.g. in terms of nationality or disability)?
- iv. Are there adequate opportunities for formative assessment to support the development of students' abilities?
- v. Is achievement of every learning outcome assessed?
- vi. Do the methods of assessment provide adequate opportunities for the learning outcomes of the course(s) to be demonstrated?
- vii. Are individual assessments weighted appropriately?
- viii. Are there clear assessment criteria?
- ix. For courses embedding work-based or work-related learning:
  - If employers are involved in the assessment of students, how do they work with academic staff? Are there systematic arrangements for coordinating such activity involving academic staff?

**e. Learning and Teaching**

- i. Are there appropriate methods of learning and teaching in place to enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes?
- ii. Is there a suitable variety of teaching and learning methods to meet the needs of a diverse range of students, including those with disabilities?

**f. Work-based learning**

- i. Are the arrangements for the management and supervision of workplace learning systematic and clear?
- ii. Will mentors and employer representatives be supported in understanding their roles and responsibilities (including assessment if relevant)?
- iii. Will Learning Agreements be in place to define the specific outcomes intended for the workplace learning, the responsibilities of the employers, students, mentors and academic tutors?
- iv. Will appropriate checks be in place to ensure the work-based learning/placement provider can provide the learning opportunities necessary for the student to meet the intended learning outcomes?
- v. Is it clear who is responsible for WBL assessment, and is assessment appropriate?
- vi. Are you satisfied that University staff and employers understand and have consideration of their responsibilities under health and safety legislation?

**g. Learning Resources**

- i. Are the learning materials relevant, sufficient, and readily available (e.g. library resources, reading lists; hard copy or web-based learning materials, VLE and IT facilities)?
- ii. Is suitable learning and teaching accommodation available?

**h. Staffing**

- i. Are the existing staff proposed for teaching on the course appropriately qualified and experienced?
- ii. Is appropriate technical and administrative support available?
- iii. Are any additional staff appointments required to enable the course to be delivered effectively?
- iv. Are any staff development arrangements proposed to support existing staff in acquiring particular new expertise?
- v. Do the overall staffing arrangements suggest that sufficient expertise will be available for the effective delivery of the intended curriculum, for the overall teaching, learning and assessment strategy, and for the achievement of the learning outcomes?
- vi. Where employers are contributing to the delivery of the course, how are these contributions designed and integrated?

**i. Student Support**

- i. Are there well-designed arrangements for student induction?
- ii. Are students provided with an appropriate level of academic support?
- iii. Are arrangements in place to ensure that any additional needs of students are identified and reasonable adjustments are put in place to meet them?
- iv. Are arrangements for tutorial support clear and generally understood by staff and students?
- v. Are Student and Course Handbooks and other information for students clear and complete?
- vi. For courses embedding work-based or work-related learning:
  - Will students be provided with appropriate support and guidance during their placement?