

VALIDATION EVENTS AT PARTNER INSTITUTIONS GUIDANCE FOR PANEL MEMBERS AND COURSE TEAMS

SECTION 1: OVERVIEW

1. Introduction to Validation Events

- 1.1 Validation events evaluate the academic content, quality and fitness for purpose of the proposed course(s). The Validation Panel judges 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 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.

2. The purpose of Validation Events

2.1 The purpose of a validation event is to ensure the:

- validity and relevance of the stated aims and the intended learning outcomes of the course(s), in accordance with relevant external reference points (including the QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education see Section 3).
- awards conferred by the University are of an equivalent standard to comparable awards throughout the UK, and that threshold standards are being achieved (see Section 3).
- course(s) are compatible with the existing curriculum portfolio.
- compliance with University academic regulations and alignment with the University's strategic plan and its supporting Education Strategy.³
- provision of a high quality HE experience, ensuring that students are provided with learning opportunities of an appropriate quality.
- appropriateness of staffing and resourcing levels.
- appropriateness of course documentation including handbooks.
- external subject expert(s) are able to contribute advice on the course(s).
- outcome is reported to the Partnerships Education Committee (PEC) with a specific, reasoned recommendation about the future of the course(s) under review. Approval of the Panel's and PEC's recommendations rests with Academic Quality and Standards Committee (AQSC).

2.2 The areas explored during a validation event are set out in Section 2.

3. Validation Panel

3.1 Membership of Validation Panels is designed around the range of courses and provision to be considered and will account for aspects such as professional body accreditation and requirements. A variety of experience and views should be available among the Panel members. Members will normally be dissociated from the delivery of the

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/>

course(s), 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.

3.2 As a minimum, in addition to the Chair, the Panel will include an external academic subject expert, a University academic member of staff and a representative from the Partner Institution. Where relevant there will also be a student representative and representatives from Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs) and employer/industry representatives.

4. Duties of the Validation Panel

4.1 It is the duty of the Validation Panel to:

- critically examine the documentation and undertake discussion with the course team.
- make a collective judgement on the quality and academic standard of the course(s), to ensure that the award(s) conferred by the University are of an equivalent standard to comparable awards throughout the UK, and that UK threshold standards (see Section 3) are being achieved.
- review the quality of the learning opportunities and information that is provided to students.
- Confirm that all areas which should be explored during the Validation event are covered in discussion during the event or sufficiently covered in the documentation.
- make a recommendation as to whether the course(s) should be validated.

4.2 The Panel will need to be assured of the rationale for the course(s) concerned and that the course team has the necessary resource base for the successful running of the course(s).

5. Roles of the members of the Panel

The external academic expert

5.1 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.

The employer representative

5.2 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.

Internal Panel members

5.3 All validation Panels include an academic member of staff from the University and a representative from the Partner Institution. The Internal Panel members aren't expected to be able to comment on subject specific content, but experience of their institution'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 team has responded to the University's institutional strategic developments as outlined in the Education Strategy and the associated Curriculum Review.
- ask questions about particular areas of responsibility or interest (for example assessment methods).

A student representative

5.4 Not all validation Panels include a student representative, but where relevant, validation events may include a student 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 periodic review takes due regard of student opinion.

6. Course team

6.1 The course team that meets the Panel:

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

7. Validation Event

Structure and approach

7.1 During a validation event, a Panel of experts explores key themes with the course team and makes recommendations for the re-approval of the course(s) under review. The Panel will hold some private discussions and will meet representatives from the course team and students. A tour of the facilities will usually be conducted and additional meetings will be arranged depending on the course(s) being considered.

7.2 The validation event may take place over a half or full day, depending on the size and nature of the award(s). The agenda, agreed by the chair of the validation, is normally based upon a standard programme which may be modified as appropriate for each event.

7.3 A successful validation event will be characterised by constructive dialogue, structured around the validation documentation provided by the course team. The Chair is responsible for highlighting positive aspects of the course and raising issues in a constructive manner.

Student meeting

7.3 A meeting will normally be held with a group(s) of students registered (or previously registered) on a related course(s) to that being considered. The course team will not be present for this part of the event.

Course team meeting

7.6 The agenda will include one or more blocks of time in which the Panel may discuss the course(s) in detail with the course team, who may choose to give a short presentation or introduction to the course(s). The course team will have the opportunity to respond to points raised by the Panel.

Outcome

7.7 After discussions, it is usual for the course team to depart to allow the Panel members to determine their recommendations. The Chair normally commences this private 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.

7.8 During the feedback session, the Chair will announce the outcome of the event and notify the course team of any conditions and/or recommendations that should be addressed or considered. A deadline will be set by which the conditions and/or recommendations should be met and/or responded to by the course team. 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, and the secretary will also produce a detailed report to circulate to the Panel and course team.

8. Validation Outcome and Report

8.1 The validation report summarises the Panel's conclusions and specifies any conditions that are to be met to successfully complete the periodic review process. As well as areas for the course team to act upon, the Panel may make recommendations for areas the course team should consider. The Review Panel may not set further conditions or recommendations after it has reported. It is usual for the Panel to specify the date by which the conditions must be met and a response provided to the recommendations and advise when the course(s) would be subject to the next periodic review, which for most courses is five years.

8.2 There are normally three possible outcomes from a validation event:

- i. **Recommendation for the course(s) to be validated**, in which case no further action by the departmental team is required
- ii. **Recommendation for the course(s) to be validated 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. The validation Panel may not set further conditions after it has reported.
 - **Conditions** are those issues that must be addressed to the satisfaction of the Panel prior to successful validation, by agreed deadlines or through the Annual Review of Courses Report process.

- **Recommendations** are those issues on which action is to be considered, possibly beyond the start of the following academic session. A response to recommendations must also be made by agreed deadlines.

iii. **Recommendation that Validation process is suspended**, whilst the course team undertakes a major revision to the course(s). This will only occur in very exceptional cases.

8.3 The Panel may also give **Commendations** which allow the Panel a chance to congratulate the course team on aspects of exceptional practice that can be shared more widely across the Partner Institution. Other areas of good practice or that are going well that the Panel would like to highlight may be included in the report, rather than listed as a commendation.

8.4 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 Academic Quality and Standards Committee.

8.5 In addition, the Dean or Deputy Dean of Partnerships may refer Partner Institution-wide issues raised in reports for consideration by the Partnership Management Board.

9. Preparation for Validations

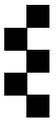
9.1 Panels may find it helpful to use the checklist below to guide their consideration of the course(s) under review. The checklist draws upon guidance in the QAA Quality Code for Higher Education.

Before the Validation Event

- Ensure you understand the University's procedure for validation and contact the Partnerships Team in advance to clarify any aspects of the process. Full details can be found at: <http://www.essex.ac.uk/partners/existing/default.aspx>
- 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 well before the event. Guidance on the areas explored during the validation event are included in Section 2.

At the Validation Event

- It is helpful to consider your role as a Panel member as that of a 'critical friend' who is there to discuss the course(s) in detail and offer helpful suggestions to the course team, as well as pointing out potential problems arising from your scrutiny of the validation documentation.
- 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 course(s) under consideration rather than focusing exclusively on areas of concern.
- Do not leave major concerns unvoiced - it is much harder to address these after a review event than before or during it.
- If you are a Panel member as a result of your subject expertise, please ensure that you are familiar with the appropriate QAA subject benchmark statement.



- External Panel members should be prepared to challenge assumptions held by the Partner Institution/course team, and offer a fresh critical but constructive perspective.
- Industry professional or employer representatives should offer a view on the value and relevance of the course(s) under review 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 course(s).
- The meeting with students should help 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.

SECTION 2: AREAS TO BE EXPLORED BY THE VALIDATION PANEL DURING THE EVENT

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 Periodic Review documentation as a prompt for possible lines of enquiry.

1. Rationale and Market Demand

- Is the course compatible with the strategic mission of the University⁴ and the Partner Institution?
- Is there a continuing market demand for the course(s) under review? Have targets been met? Are student numbers viable?
- Do the courses continue to enable students to acquire skills and knowledge which will be of use to them in their future careers?
- Have graduates been able to gain relevant employment?
- Are student entry profiles appropriate?
- Are admissions procedures fair and transparent, including those for dealing with Accreditation of Prior (Experiential) Learning (AP(E)L)?

2. Course Design

- How does the course align with the University's Strategic Plan and its supporting Education Strategy⁵?
- Do the aims and learning outcomes of the course(s) continue to be clearly defined and appropriate to the course(s)?
- Are you satisfied that UK threshold standards are being achieved (see Section 3)?
- Are there clear learning outcomes that appropriately reflect published QAA Subject Benchmark Statements, qualification benchmarks (for example for master's or foundation degrees), the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), national occupational standards and any relevant Professional, Statutory or Regulatory Body requirements (see Section 3)?
- How has the course been developed to reflect major developments in the discipline?
- How have student and employer demand impacted upon the curriculum?
- How have employers/industry experts been involved in the development of the course(s) and what impact has this had?
- Does course design take due regard for issues of equality and diversity?
- How has the curriculum been influenced by the research interests of the teaching team?
- 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 engagement with appropriate Sector Skills Councils?

3. Curriculum

- What impact has the course team's engagement with the University-wide Curriculum Review had?

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

⁵ <http://www.essex.ac.uk/about/strategy/>

- Is each learning outcome (subject-specific or skills-related) supported by appropriate elements within the curriculum?
- Is the curriculum content appropriate to each stage of the course, and to the level of the award?
- Does the design of the curriculum enable appropriate 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?
- 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?
- 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?

4. Assessment

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

5. Learning and Teaching

- Are there appropriate methods of learning and teaching in place to enable students to achieve the intended learning outcomes?
- Is there a suitable variety of teaching and learning methods to meet the needs of a diverse range of students, including those with disabilities?
- How effectively do staff draw upon their research, scholarship or professional activity to inform their teaching?

6. Work-based learning (WBL)

- Are the arrangements for the management and supervision of workplace learning systematic and clear?
- Are mentors and employer representatives supported in understanding their roles and responsibilities (including assessment if relevant)?
- Are Learning Agreements in place to define the specific outcomes intended for the workplace learning, the responsibilities of the employers, students, mentors and academic tutors?

- Are appropriate checks in place to ensure the work-based learning/placement provider provides the learning opportunities necessary for the student to meet the intended learning outcomes?
- Do both the Partner Institution and WBL/placement provider give appropriate support to students during their placement?
- Is it clear who is responsible for WBL assessment, and is assessment appropriate?
- Are you satisfied that Partner Institution members of staff and employers understand and have consideration of their responsibilities under health and safety legislation?

7. Learning resources

- 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)?
- Is suitable learning and teaching accommodation available?

8. Staffing

- Are the existing staff proposed for teaching on the course appropriately qualified and experienced?
- Is appropriate technical and administrative support available?
- Are any additional staff appointments required to enable the course to be delivered effectively?
- Are adequate staff development opportunities available to support staff in terms of their professional development? Are there adequate opportunities for scholarly activity?
- 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?
- Where employers are contributing to the delivery of the course, how are these contributions designed and integrated?

Additionally, for Postgraduate Research Provision

- What training is available for supervisors?
- How does the Partner Institution organise allocation of research students? How many research students are allocated to each supervisor and what is the Partner Institution's approach to workload allocation?
- How many new and experienced supervisors are there at the Partner Institution?

9. Student recruitment, progression and support

- Are student feedback arrangements adequate?
- Are there well-designed arrangements for student induction?
- Are students provided with an appropriate level of academic support?
- Are arrangements in place to ensure that any additional needs of students are identified and reasonable adjustments are put in place to meet them?
- Are arrangements for tutorial support clear and generally understood by staff and students?
- Are Student and Course Handbooks and other information for students clear and complete?

10. The Research Environment (for Postgraduate Research Provision)

- How does the course team create a research environment for its research students?
- Are the arrangements for supervision systematic and clear?
- Are arrangements for Supervisory Boards/Research Student Progress Committees clear and systematic and in line with the University's PGR Code of Practice?
- Are there clear progression guidelines and milestones?
- How does the course team support research students to acquire transferable skills? What research skillstraining is provided?
- What facilities (such as dedicated office space and equipment) are available?

SECTION 3: BENCHMARKING AGAINST PARTNER INSTITUTION, UNIVERSITY AND EXTERNAL REFERENCE POINTS

1. Introduction to internal (Partner Institution and University of Essex) and external reference points

Panels and committees with responsibility for consideration, approval and review (annually or periodically) of courses and modules have to be satisfied that they align with both internal (Partner Institution and University of Essex) and external reference points. These reference points include the University's strategic plans and external requirements set by accrediting bodies or the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA).

In recommending a course to be approved for the first time, or to continue to be offered, for example following a periodic review, we have to be assured that we have confidence:

- in the continuing validity and relevance of the stated aims and intended learning outcomes of the courses, in accordance with relevant internal and external reference points
- that the award(s) conferred by the University are of an equivalent standard to comparable awards throughout the UK, and that UK threshold standards are being achieved

The tables below set out the internal (Partner Institution and University of Essex) and external reference points which apply, how they are considered and their impact on course and module design and approval.

2. Threshold academic standards

These are defined in the QAA UK Quality Code for Higher Education as 'the minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for a qualification or the award of academic credit. For equivalent qualifications, the threshold level of achievement is agreed across the UK and is described by the qualifications descriptors set out in the national frameworks for higher education qualifications.'

Internal (Partner Institution and University of Essex) reference points

Reference point	Role and consideration of each reference point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Partner Institution strategy ▪ University strategy ▪ University Education strategy ▪ PPIs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Provides direction, supports education, research and employability objectives. ▪ Taken into account in curriculum design (e.g. new/amended courses/modules; teaching, learning and assessment strategies; Curriculum Reviews).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Planning Information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Data to support course team planning processes and Annual Review of Courses. Reports include analysis against PPIs, admissions and recruitment data, progression and award information, and student survey results (NSS and DLHE).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ University Quality Framework⁶ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Policies and regulations for managing academic standards. ▪ Framed around five elements: Course/module approval; Annual Review of Courses; Periodic Review; External Examiners; Student feedback.

⁶ <http://www.essex.ac.uk/quality/>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ University Regulations⁷ ▪ Framework for University of Essex awards (Rules of Assessment; Regulations for Taught Masters programmes of study; Higher Degree Regulations) ▪ Rules of Assessment ▪ Internal marking and moderation processes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ These align with external frameworks below, to ensure our courses are comparable with national expectations and are delivered consistently. ▪ Taken into account in curriculum design and delivery (e.g. new/amended courses/modules; assessment strategies). ▪ Key reference points for decisions on student achievement and award (e.g. Exam Boards).
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Summary of Academic Policy Decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Details changes to policy and regulations and is circulated to all departments and sections to ensure they are implemented.

External reference points

Reference point	Role and consideration of each reference point
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ QAA UK Quality Code for HE⁸ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Quality Code sets the expectations that all providers of UK HE education are required to meet. ▪ The Code includes 3 Parts, each including various Chapters: Part A refers to academic standards⁹; Part B refers to academic quality¹⁰; Part C refers to information provided about HE provision.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ QAA Frameworks for Higher Education Qualifications of UK Degree-Awarding Bodies (Qualifications Frameworks)¹¹ ▪ QAA Qualification characteristics statements¹² ▪ QAA Credit Framework¹³ ▪ QAA Subject Benchmarks¹⁴ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The University's frameworks are designed to align with these frameworks and requirements. ▪ They set national standards, expectations and guidance for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ the level of awards (e.g. level 6 - BA/BSc; level 7 - MA/MSc, Doctoral degrees – level 8) ▪ the type of award (e.g. foundation degrees; master's degrees) ▪ the title of awards (e.g. BSc / Grad Dip / MSc) and course titles/names (e.g. Economics and Politics or Economics with Politics) ▪ curriculum for specific subjects (subject benchmarks) ▪ credit frameworks ▪ how qualifications are awarded (i.e. against appropriate learning outcomes)

⁷ <http://www.essex.ac.uk/about/governance/regulations/default.aspx>

⁸ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code>

⁹ Threshold academic standards are the minimum acceptable level of achievement that a student has to demonstrate to be eligible for an academic award

¹⁰ Academic quality is concerned with how well the learning opportunities made available to students enable them to achieve their award

¹¹ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/quality-code-part-a>

¹² <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/characteristics-statements>

¹³ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Academic-Credit-Framework.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code/subject-benchmark-statements>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRB) requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ External professional, statutory and regulatory bodies that recognise or accredit all or part of a course, e.g. for membership or exemption from modules offered by the PSRB (e.g. the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), or British Psychological Society (BPS)). ▪ Requirements are taken into account in course design and in the regulations that apply to courses.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Research Councils 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Our annual reviews and periodic reviews would account for any Research Council requirements / benchmarks where applicable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ External Examiners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ External Examiners play a key role in offering comparison against other HE institutions and national benchmarks. They're consulted over course and module developments, assessment strategies, and new course approvals. ▪ Their annual reports offer feedback at course and module level, and feed in to Annual Review of Course reports. EE reports are summarised at department, faculty and institutional level.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ External academics 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consulted as part of course developments and approvals ▪ Included on validation and Periodic Review Panels
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Employer / industry experts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Consulted as part of course developments and approvals ▪ Engaged in initiatives to develop students' employability skills and to offer placements