

Open University Validation Partnerships (OUVP)

Guidelines for Chairing Institutional Approval, Institutional Reapproval, Validation and Revalidation Activities

1 Purpose of these guidelines

Through its Royal Charter, The Open University (OU) is able to validate the programmes of institutions that do not have their own degree awarding powers, or alternatively that wish to offer OU awards. This activity is managed within the OU by Open University Validation Partnerships (OUVP).

These guidelines have been prepared to assist anyone chairing a panel at an institutional approval, institutional reapproval or programme (re)validation activity and enable them to understand their role and responsibilities. The Chair for an institutional approval or reapproval event will usually be a member of OU staff.

2 University procedures

Institutions must be approved before programmes can be validated.

Institutional approval is the culmination of a process through which the University assures itself that an institution is able to provide an appropriate context for the delivery of programmes of study that lead to higher education awards. Some aspects, such as the investigation of the financial stability and administrative structure of an institution, will have been undertaken at an early stage, enabling the panel to focus on quality assurance systems and the learning and teaching environment.

Institutional approval or reapproval may be immediately followed by the (re)validation of one or more programmes. In this case, the University will usually appoint one Chair to cover both activities. For complex activities, parallel meetings with different staff groups may require sub-Chairs to be appointed.

3 Role of the Chair

The Chair has a distinctive role in an institutional approval or reapproval, validation or revalidation panel. It is the Chair's responsibility to create an atmosphere in which critical and professional discussion can take place, where opinions can be freely and courteously exchanged, and in which justice and fair play prevail. Much of the tone and success of an event depends on the ability of the Chair to encourage the panel to do its work as a team, rather than a set of individuals, and also to bring out the best in the institutional staff who will be speaking to the panel about the documentation that they have prepared. Although it may be agreed that other members of the panel

can concentrate on certain aspects of the proposal, the Chair must have a thorough overall perspective to ensure that the panel reaches appropriate conclusions. Notes of guidance for panel members of institutional approval and reapproval events, and for programme validations and revalidations, are available from OUVP and are included in the documentation sent to the panel before the event.

4 Before the event

The Chair will be expected to:

- 4.1 be consulted by the OUVP Senior Quality and Partnerships Manager regarding the background to the proposals, the composition of the panel, the provisional programme for the event and the key issues involved.
- 4.2 read the documentation thoroughly and identify in advance the main issues to be explored, and the range of decisions which are available. (Documentation is sent out electronically to the panel, approximately 2-3 weeks prior to the event).
- 4.3 use the initial private panel meeting to ensure that all members of the panel are fully aware of the purpose of the event and understand their roles. The main purpose of the initial private panel meeting is to identify the issues that the panel wishes to pursue with the groups they are to meet, and to confirm the agenda and programme or make modifications to it as necessary and feasible. The Chair should aim to have an agenda for each session at the event, which identifies the main topics to be covered and the member of the panel who will be responsible for leading on each topic.
- 4.4 be aware of the relevant Open University requirements as set out in the Handbook for Validated Awards.

5 During the event

- 5.1 Chairing an activity of this nature often means striking the right balance between a purposeful undertaking to complete the agreed agenda, and the need to be flexible if unanticipated issues arise. In all cases the direction and decisions of the Chair should be made clear to both the panel and to institutional staff at any particular meeting.
- 5.2 It is good practice for the Chair to take responsibility for initial introductions of the panel to the staff group and to allow staff to introduce themselves. This may often seem ritualistic, but it is important for the tone of the meeting that both panel and staff know to whom they are speaking.
- 5.3 In chairing the major sessions, it is often helpful if the Chair is able to give staff a summary of the main items that the panel wishes to cover before detailed discussion begins.
- 5.4 It is important that the atmosphere pervading each meeting is supportive and non-confrontational while being rigorous and fair; otherwise the process will be devalued in the eyes of both the staff team and the panel. Simple devices such as an informal layout of the room and the interspersing of panel and staff group members around the table can help establish a constructive atmosphere.
- 5.5 During meetings the Chair should be vigilant in keeping the flow of discussion to the timescale indicated by the agenda, but at the same time be alert to any member of

the panel or staff team who may wish to contribute. Each member of the panel should have the opportunity to lead on a number of topics. It is important to ensure, by example, that the ethos of 'peer review' is respected and observed. Condescending or inappropriate comments must be avoided. Be prepared to intervene if the discussion is being diverted or trivialised, if 'hobby horses' are being ridden or if the discussion stagnates around what is essentially a difference of opinion. Try to ensure that everyone who wishes to speak has an opportunity to do so.

- 5.6 Where an activity demands separate sub-meetings chaired by other members of the panel, the Chair should ensure that the sub-Chair has an agreed agenda and that the decisions of the sub-panel are accurately reported for inclusion in subsequent sessions.
- 5.7 When the panel meets with a group of students, the Chair should be alert to those opinions which fairly represent the students as a whole, and those which may be views of one individual. The panel may divide to meet small groups of students informally and then feed back the outcome to each other.
- 5.8 It is the role of the Chair to summarise the issues at regular intervals, e.g. at the end of each key meeting. This not only helps the panel to reach an agreed position, but also assists in the writing of the report. In particular, the Chair should seek the full agreement of the panel on the wording of conditions and recommendations arising from the final private meeting.
- 5.9 For validation and revalidation activities, the University encourages institutions to nominate an Observer for the event who will attend all formal meetings (other than those with students), including private meetings of the panel. The Observer will be a member of staff of the institution, but should not be from the senior management team or involved in the teaching of the programme being (re)validated. The Chair should encourage the Observer to assist the panel (see Guidelines for Observers). If, however, a situation should arise where the presence of the Observer is likely to inhibit discussion or the formulation of decisions, the Chair has the discretion to ask the Observer to leave until recalled. Such action should be necessary only on rare occasions. (Guidelines on the provision, position and function of observers are available from OUVV).
- 5.10 At the end of the final meeting, the Chair will guide the panel towards a decision which is appropriate and clear. The panel will agree on a recommendation, regarding whether institutional (re)approval or programme (re)validation should be granted, for consideration by the University's Curriculum Partnerships Committee (CuPC). CuPC has formal responsibility for approving the institutional approval or reapproval of an institution or the (re)validation of a programme, based on the panel recommendation and event report. If there are conditions as part of the recommended outcome, these should be carefully thought through and worded as they cannot be amended or added to after the event (see 'Guidelines for members of institutional approval and reapproval panels' and 'Notes for external panel members on validation and revalidation events'). If any elements of validation or revalidation have been sub-chaired by another member of the panel, it is usually best for the panel's decisions to be brought together for feedback by the overall Chair. The panel's recommendation to CuPC should then be explained briefly but clearly to the institutional staff teams in an oral report-back session. The Chair should ensure that points of praise and commendation are given due weight, and that criticisms are stated constructively. The Chair should not allow discussion to occur between institutional staff and the panel at this stage; only points of clarification should be offered.

6 After the event

After the event the OUV Senior Quality and Partnerships Manager will liaise with the Chair and other members of the panel to ensure that the final report is accurate and fair in all respects. Following this, the panel may also be asked to consider responses made by the institution to any conditions imposed. In some cases, it is agreed by panel members that the Chair should have delegated authority for considering responses to conditions; other members being consulted if there are major outstanding issues, or unresolved concerns in specialist areas.