

Open University Validation Partnerships (OUVP)

Guidelines for Members of Institutional Approval and Reapproval Panels

1 Institutional Approval

All organisations wishing to offer programmes of study leading to validated awards of the Open University must be approved at institutional level as providing a suitable environment for offering such programmes and for the quality assurance functions related to validated awards. This requires an organisation to show that it can meet the University's 'Principles for Institutional Approval' (*section B1 of the Handbook for Validated Awards*).

The principles cover the following areas:

- provision of an appropriate learning environment
- independence of institutional ownership from the exercise of academic authority
- academic organisation
- quality assurance and enhancement
- relations with the wider academic community.

2 Meeting the University's requirements

In order to meet these requirements all institutions must provide a range of information and demonstrate convincingly how the principles are fulfilled. There is no set model although the final submission for the Institutional Approval activity should include a self evaluation document. The University does not prescribe the form or content of an institution's self-evaluation, but it should cover the following:

- institutional mission/strategy/purpose
- the means by which these are converted into academic and programme activity
- the means by which success in achieving these goals is established and measured at all levels in the institution
- the means by which action is taken when achievements fall short of goals and targets.

More specifically, the University will be looking to an institution's self-evaluation for an analysis of:

- the effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for ensuring that approved programmes of study are maintaining a satisfactory standard and are being taught, managed and operated satisfactorily in the light of, for example, the QAA Quality Code and professional or statutory requirements.
- the effectiveness of the institution's arrangements for ensuring that approved programmes of study reflect advances in their subject disciplines and in pedagogical practice.
- the means by which the institution satisfies itself that new and existing work is adequately resourced.
- the provision made for the welfare of students and for enriching their experience of higher education.

Institutional Approval may be combined with the validation of one or more programmes of study, which allows an institution to show how the principles are met in the context of one or more specific programmes of study. Guidelines for panel members on validation and revalidation panels are available separately.

Only in exceptional circumstances will Institutional Reapproval be combined with either a programme validation or revalidation.

3 The Institutional Approval process

The initial Institutional Approval process is designed to ensure that an institution meets the University's requirements. The panel event is the culmination of a process of interactions between an institution and The Open University. It normally takes the form of a visit to the institution, but may, in exceptional circumstances, be held at another venue convenient to the institution and the University. The term 'visit' is used as shorthand for both these alternatives.

As a member of the OUVP Institutional Approval panel visiting the institution at the final stage of the process, you are one of a peer review group with knowledge and experience of quality assurance, senior management and teaching in higher education. The panel is acting on behalf of the University's Curriculum Partnerships Committee, which has responsibility for making recommendations for the approval of institutions. The panel will have representation from the OU and will be usually chaired by an OU representative. Overall OU membership of the panel will normally be in the majority and the panel composition will be decided on the basis of perceived requirements for expertise and experience.

The aim is to provide a panel which can offer a range of perspectives, take a critical but sensitive approach and make suitable comparisons with standards and practice in higher education in the UK. The panel will be supported by an OUVP representative, who is responsible for the administrative arrangements and for giving advice to the panel on OUVP requirements.

4 The Institutional Reapproval process

The University reviews the Institutional Approval of all associated and accredited institutions at intervals normally not exceeding five years. An Institutional Reapproval provides an opportunity for an institution to reflect on its work over the review period, to identify issues of importance and to discuss future academic strategies and directions. It seeks to encourage institutional self-evaluation and provide an opportunity for an institution and an external peer group to share their experiences of institutional practices and developments. Institutional Reapprovals focus on the effectiveness of systems for sustaining and developing academic quality, including the standards actually achieved by students, approaches to teaching and learning and staff's research, scholarly and developmental activity in support of the curricula.

For an Institutional Reapproval to succeed and be beneficial and productive for all participants, it should be a means by which an OU panel joins with, rather than imposes upon the institution, a process of continuing critical reflection.

5 The Institutional Approval or Institutional Reapproval meeting

The Institutional Approval or Institutional Reapproval meeting is the culmination of the approval or reapproval process. Its purpose is to explore and clarify the information provided in the submission documents. The aim is to assist the future development of the institution as a provider of higher education as well as to ensure that the 'Principles for Institutional Approval' can be seen to be met.

Panel members are asked to review the institution's documentation in advance of the meeting and to identify the issues for the agenda. The panel will be asked for their feedback in advance, and this will be shared with the institution although this does not preclude other matters being raised during the meetings. Some of the matters raised may have been discussed with the institution by the Chair or by OUVV, in order to clarify the agenda.

The panel will spend at least one day reviewing documentation provided by the institution for its briefing meeting. As part of its briefing meeting the panel will bring together the issues to be pursued with the groups they are to meet, and confirm the agenda and programme for the event or make modifications to it as necessary and feasible. The Chair will aim to have planned agenda for each meeting which identify the main topics to be covered, and the member of the panel who will be responsible for leading on each topic.

In order to explore how an institution is proposing to meet, or is fulfilling, the requirements for Institutional Approval, the panel will normally meet the groups set out below. An indication of typical issues for discussion is included. The panel will often wish to explore the same issues with more than one group.

- senior management, including representation from the governing body of the institution - institutional mission, strategic planning and development, institutional management, executive and academic structures, policy making, commitment to equal opportunities, staffing and staff appraisal and development, finance and resources.
- members of the Academic Board or Board of Studies responsible for the standard and quality of programmes - academic responsibilities, quality assurance, institutional level regulations, external examining, research and staff development.
- members of any group responsible for the consideration of new programmes and the monitoring of current programmes e.g. Academic Standards Committee - internal validation and review, programme monitoring and evaluation, provision for equal opportunities.
- representatives of the teaching staff - the staff experience of the institution's academic community, understanding and ownership of quality assurance processes, opportunities to contribute to programme development, staff development and research, irrespective of disability, ethnicity and gender.
- student representatives - the student experience of the institution's learning environment, student representation within the committee structures and opportunities for feedback to staff, student support, including support for students with special needs.

The activity will also include a review of the teaching resources and other facilities of the institution, including library and computing facilities.

7 Possible outcomes

The panel will make recommendations to the Curriculum Partnerships Committee, which will be reported to the institution at the end of the final meeting.

Approval decision – Institutional Approval

If initial approval is recommended, this will be for a full period of no more than five years or for a shorter period of, perhaps, two or three years in the first instance. However, it is open to the University to instigate an Institutional Reapproval at any time during the initial period of approval.

The panel can also recommend an Interim Review, usually to focus on a limited agenda of issues of particular concern, often to be conducted by the Chair or a small sub-set of the panel.

Approval Decision - Institutional Reapproval

At Institutional Reapproval, the panel can recommend approval for a full period of no more than five years, or for a shorter period of two to three years. The length of approval period will be directly related to the confidence of the panel in that Institution.

Conditions of approval

Approval may be conditional on further work by the institution to be completed before approval is confirmed. Conditions will be reported clearly with a completion date. The panel will decide whether the response to these conditions will be considered by all members, or perhaps by the Chair on behalf of the panel, on the understanding that other members will be consulted if the Chair has any doubts about the adequacy of the response.

Recommendations

The panel may also make recommendations to assist institutional development and these will require follow-up in the institution's annual reports to the University.

Non-approval or termination of approval

If initial approval cannot be recommended at Institutional Approval, advice will be given on how the proposals need to be developed to achieve approval.

In the case of Institutional Reapproval, a possible final outcome could be a recommendation to the University for the approval to be suspended or terminated. This outcome would effectively suspend or terminate all programme validation and no further registration of the institution's students for validated awards would be permitted.

The panel's recommendations are subject to approval by the University's Curriculum Partnerships Committee.

Institutional Approval will only become effective when a programme of study is approved, either as part of the same event or separately.

8 The report

The OUV representative will draft a report which will reflect the discussions during the day as well as record the formal recommendation to Curriculum Partnerships Committee, set out any conditions of approval to be met and any recommendations made. The report is normally circulated in draft to panel members for comment within about four weeks of the event. The institution is also invited to comment on matters of factual accuracy in the report.