

Section 2:

New Course Development and Approval

2.1. This section considers the process and principles for new courses seeking approval and subsequent validation. The process has been written in accordance with Office for Students On-going Conditions of Registration, European Standards and Guidelines and the QAA Quality Code for Higher Education. The section applies to all taught undergraduate and postgraduate courses; Research degrees with a taught component (e.g. MRes or Professional Doctorate).

2.2. The University will publish a Commissioning Brief on an annual basis to ensure that new course development is aligned to the University's strategic aims and identified opportunities. The brief will be intelligence led drawing on market intelligence, employer insights, resource considerations, academic expertise and the perspectives of students and alumni. Colleges wishing to develop new courses to respond to the Commissioning Brief will be required to submit a Course Proposal Business Case for consideration by the Portfolio Planning Committee (PPC).

Note: Specific definitions of modes of study exist for external bodies', further advice is available from Quality and Standards.

2.3. PPC has responsibility for ensuring that the proposal is considered in terms of fit to the Commissioning brief, resources (including staffing, estate, and other overheads), market demand and fit with the University strategy and, where appropriate, approve it.

2.4. The aims of the course approval are:

- To ensure that it is compatible with other courses and the University's strategy;
- To ensure that there is a market for the course;
- To ensure that the necessary learning resources are available.

2.5. To ensure that new courses have the appropriate time for course development and marketing giving the best possible chance of success deadlines are agreed each year, these are normally expected to be at least 18 months in advance of the start date.

2.6. Course Proposal Business Cases will include a rationale of how the proposal responds to the Commissioning Brief; how the identified market will be met; the vision and coherence of the course and projected numbers and associated costs.

2.8. When considering a course proposal business case, the committee will:

- a) review the proposals for new course provision as part of the integrated planning process;

- b) satisfy itself that the financial, academic rationale and quality aspects of new course proposals included in the College plan have been considered and signed off and recommend that the course may either proceed to validation or require additional information;
 - c) develop a University-wide portfolio perspective to ensure the avoidance of duplication of course provision across College's;
 - d) review trends in student surveys, recruitment and progression for existing courses within the School where applicable;
 - e) receive and approve proposals for changes to existing award titles in the context of the existing university and College portfolio; considering External Examiner comments and student feedback.
- 2.9. Once PPC has approved a course, the detailed academic case will be made through a submission to the Course Validation Standing Panel (CVSP). Approval is required for all new named awards by PPC on behalf of Academic Council.

College Course Development before the submission of documentation¹

- 2.10. Following approval by PPC the Head of College will establish a formal course development team to prepare each new course for validation. All Course Leaders should hold full-time or fractional contracts of employment with the University; Visiting Lecturers cannot normally be appointed as Course Leaders. It is recommended that responsibilities are clearly designated to identify issues relevant to the proposal and to identify a realistic timescale for the validation.
- 2.11. Once a course team has been established a compulsory guided intensive course design process will be followed. The process will be led by the Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation and will include expertise from relevant Professional Service Departments, employers and students and alumni. Separate workshops will be convened for course and module development.
- 2.12. A Programme Specification and related documentation should be developed in conjunction with the Quality and Standards Office as part of the course design process (see section 5 for a full list of documents).
- 2.13. Two external adviser nomination forms should also be submitted to the Deputy Registrar, Quality and Standards or nominee for approval as soon as possible following PPC approval (see 2.35-2.39). Independent external comments are crucial, however important Home Office checks are required prior to work being undertaken so prompt nominations are critical to the timeliness of the process.
- 2.14. The Head of College must ensure that course development is informed by consultation and is responsible for ensuring any necessary external consultations with other Colleges, employers, subject specialists, professional bodies and external examiners are undertaken. The course leader designate must ensure that the course conforms to the requirements of the University and of any external validating and professional bodies.

¹ Non-collaborative provision

- 2.15. All courses are expected to comply with the principles and aims of course design and assessment as outlined in Section 1.

Reference Points

- 2.16. Internal References (links may not be available externally).

[Education Strategy](#)

[Academic Regulations](#)

[Curriculum Framework](#)

[Strategic Framework for Employability](#)

[SEEC Level Descriptors](#)

College Education implementation strategy

- 2.17. There are a range of external reference points for course teams to consider when undertaking curriculum design for a validation or in designing new modules.

The [Framework for Higher Education Qualifications](#) (FHEQ) is based on the premise that qualifications should be awarded on the basis of achievement of outcomes rather than years of study. Qualification descriptors set out the generic outcomes and attributes expected for the award of individual qualifications. These are embedded into the University's Undergraduate and Postgraduate Frameworks set out in the Handbook of Academic Regulations.

[The QAA Quality Code](#) provides guidance on maintaining quality and standards in Higher Education Institutions. The University takes the guidance set out the Code into account when developing its own policy and procedures in the relevant areas. Programme Specifications also form part of the Academic Infrastructure and the QAA provides guidance to institutions on producing specifications.

[European Standards Guidance for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area](#) (ESG) were adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in 2005 and revised in 2015. The focus of the ESG is on quality assurance relating to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation. The University of Westminster processes have been mapped to the ESG expectations.

[Subject Benchmark Statements](#) (SBS) provide a means for the course team and the wider academic community to describe the nature and characteristics of degrees in a specific subject area. They set out expectations about the standards of awards. They describe what gives a discipline its coherence and identity and define what can be expected of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed to develop understanding or competence in the subject. Interdisciplinary awards may need to reference more than one SBS.

Professional Body Accreditation

- 2.18. Courses seeking professional body accreditation must consider any requirements of the relevant external body in their curriculum content and design, and make those requirements clear when presenting their course(s). Where the external requirements need Course Specific Regulations to be approved by Academic Council this may need to be achieved concurrently. All published documentation must make clear the PSRB accreditation is still subject to approval until written confirmation from the PSRB has been received in writing by the College and the Quality and Standards Office informed.

- 2.19. If a Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) require that a validation event is held differing documentation may be required including for example the Course Handbook. Should additional elements be required the Quality and Standards Office will work with the Course team and the PSRB to incorporate these elements into the validation event. In the case of joint University/Professional or Statutory Body Panels, external advisers normally hold full membership to the panel.

Documentation

- 2.20. A Programme Specification and related documentation should be developed in conjunction with the Quality and Standards Office. The Programme Specification and Module Descriptors are the definitive descriptions of a course and set out the intended learning outcomes that students are expected to achieve, the level of study, the credit allocation of the course and modules and the teaching and learning strategies to enable students to achieve them. They are the key documents in course validation, as well as being an important source of information for students.
- 2.21. The academic level of any course is determined by its aims, learning outcomes, syllabus content, its assessment methods and assessment criteria for judging student achievement and in line with the FHEQ. Academic levels 4, 5, and 6 correlates to the first, second and third years of a full-time three-year undergraduate honours degree, level 7 to Master's degrees.
- 2.22. The structure and content of the curriculum must explicitly support the subject-specific title of the award. The general award title, for example, whether it is an Arts or a Science award, will be determined by the relevant external subject benchmarks, and subject content relative to cognate courses within the University. Courses would normally be validated with either an Arts or a Science award; these would not normally be presented as alternatives with the same course content, but rather distinct courses with distinctive course outcomes.
- 2.23. All validated awards must have clear subject specific course outcomes, which inform the definition of aims and learning outcomes for each module.
- 2.24. Where a course is a named pathway within a wider course the pathway must have academic coherence both at the point of initial validation and subsequently through the addition and/or deletion of individual modules.
- 2.25. Care must be taken to ensure clarity of definition in learning outcomes of Level 7 postgraduate modules, especially in terms of higher-level analytical skills and the expectation of students' abilities to sustain advanced independent critically evaluative work, which also underpins much Level 6 undergraduate work.

Documentation sign off

- 2.26. The Associate Head of College (Education and Students) should sign off the documentation before it is submitted by the Course team to the two approved External Subject Advisers for comment (see 2.35).
- 2.27. Following feedback from the External Subject Advisers the following documentation should be submitted to the Course Validation Standing Panel:

- Programme Specification
 - Module Descriptors for new modules
 - Module Descriptors for current modules that will be included in the new course
 - Proposal for any course specific regulations
 - Teaching staff details (short CVs)
 - External Subject Adviser Reports and the Course team's response to them; (see section 2.35-2.38)
 - Portfolio Planning Committee submission (for information)
 - Course Validation Covering Template.
 - Online course materials (distance learning courses only, see 2.48-2.52)
- 2.28. CVSP meets several times a year on dates published in advance. In order for a proposal to be considered by the Standing Panel, the Course team must submit all paperwork at least three weeks before the date of the meeting. The Standing Panel will only consider proposals with a complete set of documentation, submitted by the paper deadline.
- 2.29. Courses will not be advertised 'subject to validation'.

Course Validation Standing Panel Roles and Responsibilities

- 2.30. The Course Validation Standing Panel (CVSP) has delegated responsibility from Academic Council for considering, advising on, and ultimately formally approving the proposed content and structure of new courses.²
- 2.31. The approval of proposed new courses is considered in the light of both academic and planning criteria, including a consideration of the resource implications of any proposal. In doing so CVSP will scrutinise and give formal approval to the detailed structure and module descriptors for new taught and research programmes, reporting decisions for noting at Academic Council.
- 2.32. The terms of reference and indicative membership are agreed by Academic Council. This includes representation from each College (as nominated by the Head of College), Students and Academic Services, Quality and Standards, the Centre for Education and Teaching Innovation and an academic external member.
- 2.33. The Panel Chair and a Deputy is nominated on behalf of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education). The Panel Chair will not consider any proposals being proposed by their own College or School, in such cases the Deputy will normally lead discussions.
- 2.34. The following principles underpin the aims of the course approval and validation process:
- Academic rigour – through this process Westminster seeks to ensure that its courses are well-designed, academically coherent and intellectually challenging, and that they are informed by research and capable of enriching the student experience; proposers of new courses are responsible for making sure that proposals are drawn up with due consideration of the appropriate internal and external references

² For collaborative partnerships see Collaborations Section

- Proportionality – the process for approval and validation will reflect the level of risk involved in activity so that process is flexible and responsive to discipline needs. Documentary requirements will also be commensurate with the level of risk;
 - Peer Review – validation is underpinned by academic and professional peer review by internal colleagues and external subject advisers.
- 2.35. Representatives from the Course team proposing the new course are expected to attend the meeting to speak in support of the proposal and answer any queries raised by the Standing Panel. The aims of course validation are to ensure that:
- the course is appropriate in terms of its level and content, and in the light of current practice and development in the discipline;
 - the course is pedagogically sound
 - the course develops the employability of graduates.

Independent externality

- 2.36. During validation, the course structure, content and learning, teaching and assessment methods of all new proposed courses will be scrutinised by two independent subject specialists, known as external advisers. Independent External advisers are approved by the Deputy Registrar, Quality and Standards or nominee, following the submission of an external adviser nomination from the Course team, approved by the Associate Head of College (Education and Students).
- 2.37. External advisers will be subject specialist advisers also comment on a number of set questions, including the appropriateness of the curriculum, relevant Subject Benchmark Statements, the level of the proposed course in relation to the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), the appropriateness of principal members of staff involved in the delivery of the programme (usually evidenced in the form of a Curriculum Vitae) and how the course prepares graduates for employability. External advisers are advisers to the validation standing panel, as such CVSP will consider the reports and the response from the proposing Course team.
- 2.38. In all cases:
- External advisers must not be either current or recent (i.e within the previous six years) External Examiners at the University, member of staff, a student or member of the College Employability Board. Any other connections with the University or course teams are expected to be declared on the nomination form.
 - Direct reciprocation must always be avoided, the general principle that academics, senior administrators and practicing professionals are prepared to give their time to contribute constructive criticism to course provision is central to the UK's quality assurance processes in HE. The nominating course representative and the Head of College attests to this independence in nominating and signing the nomination form.
 - External advisers must report on the proposed new course's alignment with external reference points and the coherence of the curriculum with its subject area(s).

- Comments from two externals are normally required. One of these must be an external adviser with the appropriate academic experience, course teams are however also encouraged to include an external adviser from industry, commerce or professions who can explicitly consider the course in terms of its employability, graduate attributes, links with industry and specific/transferable skills.
 - The Head of College may also consider that the University should not draw external advisers from institutions identified as being in direct competition with the University of Westminster in the subject area concerned: in this context direct competition normally implies geographical proximity.
 - For distance learning courses (see 2.48-2.52)
- 2.39. External advisers to Panels convened at the University of Westminster receive a standard fee in recognition of their contribution to the Validation; they will be required to provide the appropriate documentation in advance of undertaking their duties in accordance with the Home Office requirements.
- 2.40. In addition, the membership of CVSP includes an external senior academic member of staff at another UK higher education institution who provides additional assurances that proposed new courses have fully considered external reference points such as the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications, and that the course structure and learning, teaching and assessment methods are sound.

Course Validation Standing Panel decisions

- 2.41. If the validation standing panel is satisfied with the academic case for a proposal and that the resources required for its delivery are sufficient to ensure the quality of the provision, it will report its approval to Academic Council. CVSP may attach conditions or recommendations to its consideration of proposed new courses. Confirmation and evidence that these conditions have been met will be required before reports are made to Academic Council. In considering the proposal CVSP can determine if the response to condition or recommendations can be considered by Chair's action.
- 2.42. Course Approval may be:
- without time limit (6 years) approval and in line with the re-validation schedule for provision within the rest of the School.
 - for a specified period (up to six academic sessions)
- 2.43. CVSP may decide that academic case has not been made, or that there are insufficient resources for the course which cannot reasonably be addressed by setting conditions. The decision of CVSP will in such cases be Non-approval, possibly with encouragement to resubmit after suggested revision. This decision will be reported to Academic Council and PPC.
- 2.44. Following the CVSP approval a Course Handbook must be produced and submitted to the Quality and Standards Office. This must be submitted at least 6 weeks prior to the course commencing. Any inconsistencies noted from the signed documentation may lead to the course being referred back to CVSP. Examples may include academic regulations, discrepancies in the modes of study or other issues that are deemed to cause a significant student experience or publication of information issue.

Course Records

- 2.45. Course level information: The Quality and Standards Office is responsible for the accurate set up and maintenance of all courses in the Student Records System to ensure the title and modes of delivery (including if the course is part time day, part time evening, part time mixed mode, distance learning or block mode) accurately reflects the agreed validated course. In doing so an appropriate course code is allocated for the new award title, which also includes the duration and start date. This information links to the public facing web page and other external information. This will normally be done at the point of final approval by CVSP or Chair and officially communicated to applicable departments.
- 2.46. It is the responsibility of the course leader or equivalent to ensure that the programme specification, course web pages and any associated course materials only reflect approved course information.
- 2.47. It is the responsibility of the Quality and Standards Office to ensure the student record system accurately reflects the module titles, summative assessments types, percentage weightings and qualifying marks in line with the approved module descriptors. The Quality and Standards Office communicate the creation of the new modules to a wide group of stakeholders.

On-Line Learning and Distance Learning

- 2.48. In the case of distance learning course the Course Validation Standing Panel must assure itself that the provision of the study materials for the first calendar year of course operation is at an appropriate standard. It is considered important that the course team understands the student facing materials required to ensure the effective student learning experience prior to implementation of a distance learning course. The full content and material for at least two module, must therefore be scrutinised by the Standing Panel and its external advisers.
- 2.49. At least one external adviser with experience of distance learning delivery is normally expected, alongside a subject specialist. Both externals must provide scrutiny of, and comment on, the content of the materials and their delivery. Internal advisers from other parts of the University for example Virtual Learning specialists and course leaders with experience of distance learning may be asked to attend the CVSP meeting.
- 2.50. The material to be reviewed and commented on by the external adviser:
outline for one or more modules
- sample material for two or more modules
- 2.51. The aim of the scrutiny of the materials in addition to the standard course documentation is to ensure that they are technically accurate, user friendly, and that course teams have an opportunity for feedback prior to delivery of the modules. In giving feedback, the adviser should look for:
- recognition of knowledge and skills of the user
 - suitability of style
 - relevance of items covered
 - coverage at the appropriate level of all relevant items
 - clear presentation of text features (activities, assignments, feedback, projects)

- variety of activities, assignments and projects to support students' active learning
- currency of content.

2.52. CVSP will assure itself that the intended on-line learning activities, when combined with the face-to-face contact opportunities (where applicable), will enable the overall delivery of the course learning outcomes. In addition, CVSP will need to be satisfied that the way in which the course team intend to manage the on-line learning activities match the need to deliver the learning outcomes with the resources available.