

UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK

For the meeting of the Academic Quality & Standards Committee  
to be held on 15 June 2015

**Review and Redesign of the University's Course Approval Process**

1. Background

Since 2010, University and Faculty committees have identified a number of areas in which the current course approval process could be improved as set out in Appendix A, attached. In addition, recent departmental, course and University reviews have indicated that a significant revision of the framework for approval of courses is needed, to include:

- the development of a more risk-based approach;
- major revisions to documentation, scrutiny and oversight;
- the development of an electronic system to enhance, workflow, assurance, reporting and maintenance of definitive records.

Underpinning the University's approach to revised course approval processes set out below are the following guiding principles:

- (a) Provision of enhanced institutional assurance and accountability in the standards and quality of the University's learning and teaching provision through its course design and approval processes;
- (b) Enhancement in the quality of and information provided relating to student learning opportunities;
- (c) Delivery of risk-based, proportionate processes which enable agility and innovation and include all key stakeholders, including students;
- (d) Reduction in the on-going burdens on academic and administrative colleagues;
- (e) Delivery of professional, effective, efficient and consistent processes which enable and promote academic excellence;
- (f) Engaging students in the development of new and revised course proposals.

2. Business Process Review (BPR)

A two-day BPR of the University's course approval process took place in April 2015. The first day involved academic colleagues representing committees involved in course approval at departmental, faculty and University levels and representatives from Teaching Quality. The focus was to establish key stages and aspects of an ideal course approval process that would meet all expectations, e.g. flexibility, clarity, transparency, and robustness of quality assurance, including delivery-readiness of approved courses.

The second day of the BPR involved administrative colleagues from across academic departments and central administrative services to consider the practical implications of the proposed new course approval process. The group also considered the necessary provision of support to departments early on in the course design stage, means of capturing data and other necessary outputs e.g. for statutory returns and means of producing a central record of the course information which the University is obliged to maintain.

To ensure as wide a consultation as possible, a briefing note was circulated to a broader group of colleagues, academic and administrative, with a request for their feedback on known issues, additional matters to be taken into consideration and thoughts on potential solutions which might usefully be considered (a list of colleagues involved in the BPR and the consultation exercises is provided in Appendix B, attached).

3. Outcomes

(a) Proposed new Course Approval process

In order to secure the above principles, BPR participants considered the following aspects of any course approval to be of key importance:

- Academic rationale and viability;
- Course content and learning outcomes;
- High academic standards;
- Financial viability;
- Clarity of the process and clarity of the information produced;
- Completeness of course information;
- Risk management;
- Appropriately-timed review mechanisms to guarantee delivery-readiness of courses;
- University's ability to meet need and demand;
- Alignment with University/departmental strategy;
- Institutional reputation.

The resultant proposed new course approval process is set out at Appendix C. A diagrammatic representation of the new process is presented in Appendix D.

(b) Workflow solution

An electronic document management and work flow system was identified as a key requirement, to facilitate the combination in one single process: pre-populated learning outcomes, auto-generation of learning outcomes from the module to the course level, course specifications, course regulations, annual modules diet, KIS, HEAR, each of which currently requires correspondence with departments on an annual basis from different central teams with attendant risks and concerns about multiple approaches for information. It is acknowledged that this will take time to explore, specify, tender and implement, and have a financial cost attached. However the removal of the current academic and administrative overheads associated with managing the current systems and attendant potential reputational risks was felt likely to render the approach good value for money.

(c) Areas for further consideration

Staff involved in the BPR identified a number of areas for further consideration, including:

- (i) Student involvement  
Although the requirement of student (SSLC) input has been made explicit at the departmental stage, the involvement of students in the Review Panel stage will need to be discussed with the Students' Union.
- (ii) Module proposals  
Any system put in place to operationalise the new course approval process should also support the module approval process. This would represent significant resource savings at departmental and University levels in the long run and would facilitate the provision of a complete University record of all modules offered and their relationship to individual courses.

- (iii) Training and support for members of the Review Panel  
Robust and ongoing training for members of the Review Panel will be important to ensure they are conversant with quality assurance requirements; University priorities as set out in its Strategy; Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies' requirements, etc.
- (iv) Chair of the Review Panel  
In discussing the proposed new process, staff identified the need for the Chair of the Review Panel to be able to approve courses, potentially exercising the delegated authority of the Senate. Discussion took place relating to the potential danger in governance terms of the accumulation of such significant power in a single individual.

#### 4. Timescales and next steps

Recommendations from the BPR were submitted to Faculty and University-level committees for consideration earlier this summer term.

The Faculty of Social Sciences noted that the Chair of the Review Panel should not be the only person approving courses, but that others be involved to spread the responsibility, build up experience and expertise, and make the system more resilient. It further recommended input from administrative sections, including Teaching Quality. It recognised that although greater flexibility of the course approval process was desirable, a timetable for consideration of course proposals should be considered to allow members of the Review Panel to plan their workload and to give departments an idea of timescales for approval. The Faculty sought retention of the option to hold face-to-face meetings of the Review Panel to discuss course proposals, including the option of a departmental representative being present, and noted that the development of guidance for academic departments would be a crucial part of the process. Social Sciences advocated that the role of the Review Panel members be reflected by a time allocation to guarantee members' ability to focus on the review of course proposals and to facilitate timely review. It recommended that incentives, including a time allocation, be put in place to make the Review Panel membership attractive to high calibre colleagues across the University.

Some colleagues from the Faculty of Arts have expressed some nervousness about rejection of courses purely on financial grounds since they regard PGT provision as key to PGR recruitment which is widely recognised and to which the reviewing panel would need to be appropriately sensitive.

The Faculty of Science came out most strongly in seeking to retain the option for Faculty sub-committees to review proposals and the University Review Panel should retain access to membership of these committees within it. The Faculty of Science also sought to avoid proposals progressing too far and to weed out early on any potentially overlapping provision. Arguably the new system should manage all of these issues better than the current one. They also noted a need to work carefully on the workload model used to compensate review panel members.

The proposal was further considered by the Board of Graduate Studies where many members recognised that the proposal for change picked up known deficiencies in current processes. The Chair of BGS recommended that the Chair of the Review Panel should also be a member of AASC and colleagues from the Students' Union looked forward to further consultation as the project progresses.

The Board of Undergraduate Studies welcomed a number of features of the revised course approval process: the proposal for an electronic workflow system for course approval; the

proposal for a unified approval final stage incorporating resolution of non-academic matters (e.g. resourcing); the principle of smaller numbers of approvers considering smaller numbers of course proposals in the process prior to final approval, and measures to make the process more responsive where necessary to factors such as externally-determined deadlines for course introduction. The Board did recommend that the Boards of Undergraduate Studies and Graduate Studies should retain a formal role in the approval of the academic quality and rationale of new courses, and sought clarification of the relationship between the proposed new course approval panel and the existing committee structures.

Unless any substantial concerns are raised by the Academic Quality and Standards Committee, it is intended that the recommendations for change to the course approval process be presented to the Senate at its meeting on 29 June 2015. If approval is given by the Senate, a detailed process outline will be designed and submitted to committees during the academic year 2015-16, with revised forms and guidance documents, with the aim of introducing the new process fully from 2016-17. An option appraisal on potential IT solutions (of which there are several) would also need to be undertaken and resource released to complete necessary work during 2015-16.

5. Recommendation to the Academic Quality & Standards Committee

The Committee is invited to consider and approve proposed changes to the course approval process as set out above and in attached appendices.

Roberta Wooldridge Smith  
Deputy Academic Registrar  
16 June 2015

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## Course Approval Process Business Process Review April 2015

### Rationale for the Business Process Review

Over time, a list of practical comments on the existing University's course approval process have been collated. Although the existing process works, it is very resource heavy at all levels (departmental, Faculty and University), offers little flexibility to respond quickly to market demand and does not encourage innovative approaches to course design. The following areas have been identified as requiring review:

- (a) Use of paper forms
  - (i) Causes version control concerns;
  - (ii) Makes it difficult to retain a definite comprehensive institutional record of approved courses, which is easy to retrieve and freely available centrally for all staff and students (current and prospective) to see;
  - (iii) Is resource intensive in terms of data input to and from the course proposal forms, increasing the likelihood of mistakes being introduced and preventing the University from using this resource for more sophisticated tasks. This is true at University level (inputting data to SIST and other systems), but also at departmental level (producing course website from course proposal forms).
  
- (b) Relevance of course approval form fields
  - (i) Some fields require departments to provide information not needed for courses to be set up, while omitting information key for operational support for the course, which results in additional layer of interaction between academic departments and administrative sections, extending the period of time required for a course to be fully set up on University systems (this may hold up admissions processes, etc.).
  
- (c) Inadequate interconnectedness of course information databases
  - (i) A number of standalone databases require departments to populate information already provided via course proposals, e.g. course specification database, course regulations database, KIS information, HEAR statements;
  - (ii) This lack of integrated systems results in regular requirements for academic departments to provide/confirm information for all courses, rather than simply indicating cases where change occurs, thus draining departmental resource.
  
- (d) Disjointed academic and financial approval of course proposals
  - (i) Academic and financial approvals are currently not linked, creating an undesirable split in the approval process with attendant risk. Although a separation of the two processes is desirable (and indeed required by external bodies, e.g. QAA), there needs to be contact points to satisfy the University that all aspects of a course approval have been addressed and that a course could not recruit students with any aspect of the academic or financial approvals outstanding.
  
- (e) Lack of flexibility of the course approval process
  - (i) Course approval is currently very inflexible and tied to the Committee timetable, making it difficult for the University to support departments in responding to market pressures. It also results in an inefficient use of University resource and limits departments in terms of spreading workload throughout the year to meet their business needs efficiently;
  - (ii) Linking of the course approval process to the committee timetable puts committee members under pressure to review all course paperwork (in addition to other committee papers) within a short period of time. This is

- particularly pronounced at postgraduate level, where proposals for new and revised courses are more common. The same is true at University level for the Boards of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies;
- (iii) The use of Chair's Action on behalf of committees as a means of bridging long gaps between scheduled meetings raises quality assurance concerns and resistance to using this option is growing. An alternative arrangement, the use of a sub-group of the committee to review a proposal outside a committee meeting, adds further pressure on committee members, whose committee work might not be reflected in their department's workload model.
- (f) Reactive, rather than proactive
- (i) The existing process focuses on the consideration and approval of a fully developed course proposal. The process misses an early stage where it would support and guide staff/departments putting together a course proposal (and encourage early discussion within and between departments). Providing an early opportunity for interaction of staff developing a course with colleagues in academic departments and administrative sections would allow for a more efficient use of resource and more robust course proposals (e.g. interaction with the Marketing and Admissions Teams for market demand information and admissions criteria; the Library and ITS for teaching and learning resources and support).
- (g) Static, rather than dynamic
- (i) The existing course approval process does not encourage regular review of the course. Once approved, a course is not revisited unless a review is initiated by the lead department (the Annual Course Review process offers an opportunity for departments to reflect on their taught provision);
  - (ii) Incremental changes to courses may result in substantial shifts over time, the impact of which may not be appreciated and hence approved by committees (full paperwork is not required for a series of 'minor' changes);
  - (iii) Changes to individual modules may impact on course structures without those being necessarily submitted for review and approval; the paper-based process does not alert proposers to changes to modules/courses that may have implications for the course structure, departmental assessment strategies, etc.

**Course Approval Process Business Process Review April 2015**

List of Attendees

Day 1 (17 April 2015)

Professor D Lamburn, Chair, Collaborative, Flexible and Distributed-Learning Sub-Committee

Dr D Wood, Chair, Undergraduate Studies Committee of the Faculty of Science

Professor L Roberts, Pro-Dean (Education), Warwick Medical School

Professor K Neailey, WMG, member of SUGS

Dr P Roberts, History, Chair of AGSC

Mrs K Gray, Senior Assistant Registrar (Teaching Quality)

Dr J Lee, School of Modern Languages and Cultures, Member of AUSC

Mrs R Wooldridge Smith, Deputy Academic Registrar

Mr M Mik, Teaching Quality

Administrative Representatives (14)

Ms L Burton, Warwick Business School

Mr R Horton, Departmental Administrator, Department of History

Ms M Stott, Head of Admin, Commercial and Student Services, ITS

Ms A Thomas, ITS

Mr R Allinson-French, SITS

Mr D Brandist, Student Records

Ms H Riley, Library

Dr E Melia, SPA (Space management & Timetabling)

Ms L McCarthy (WMS)

Mrs K Gray, Senior Assistant Registrar (Teaching Quality)

Mrs R Wooldridge Smith, Deputy Academic Registrar

Mr M Mik, Teaching Quality

Mr R McIntyre, Strategic Planning and Analytics (AASC)

Mr R Boyatt, ITS

Colleagues consulted via email

Dr I Carre, Member of SUGS

Ms J Clarkson, Marketing

Ms M Davies, International Office

Professor A Dowd, Academic Director, Graduate School

Mrs T Horton, Departmental Administrator, CIM

Mr S Gilling, University Legal Adviser

Dr M Glover, Academic Registrar

Professor L Gracia, member of UFSS

Ms E King, Learning and Development Centre

Mr J Langlands, Finance Office

Mrs J Latimer, Examinations Office

Mr A Malin, PG Admissions

Ms S Miles, Student Records

Dr Z Newby, member of AGSC

Ms C Nicholls, Departmental Administrator, History of Art

Ms C Oldham, Strategic Planning and Analytics

Professor J Palmowski, Chair of BGS

Mr D Pearson, Graduate School

Professor DL Steinberg, Chair of GFSS

Mr M Youlton, UG Admissions

## Course Approval Process Business Process Review April 2015

### Proposed New University Course Approval Process

The proposed new course approval process has two distinct stages: departmental and University.

#### 1. Departmental stage

A suggestion is made for a new course to be created. This can be generated by an academic, based on their research/teaching portfolio; by the department itself, based on their strategic plans; by an external funding body (e.g. employer, Research Councils, government, sector developments, etc.); by the market.

First, informal discussions take place within the department to assess the viability of the proposal. These discussions should identify and dismiss proposals without any chance for approval, e.g. where a new member of staff proposes a course, which was discussed at length in previous years and detailed investigation indicated lack of sufficient demand. This would also be a stage where proposals could be stopped for courses already in existence elsewhere at the University or such that would not be aligned with the department's strategy, avoiding duplication of effort without eventual departmental benefit. Roles consulted at this stage will differ from department to department, but would typically include: Head of Department, Director of Teaching & Learning (or similar), Director of (Under)Graduate Studies, Departmental Administrator.

#### (a) Course proposal outline

If the proposal gets the go ahead at the informal discussions stage, an academic member of staff will be invited to produce an outline course proposal and an outline business case. Although light touch in comparison with the full course proposal, this stage would involve the course proposer in discussions with departmental colleagues and colleagues from other academic departments across the University (where appropriate, e.g. for joint or interdisciplinary degrees). There would also be an early interaction with support services, e.g. Teaching Quality, Marketing, Admissions, Library, ITS, etc. This is to ensure that the proposal is not duplicating an existing course and that any potential risks are raised at an early stage, ensuring enough time to allow arrangements to be put in place to manage those risks. It would also allow academic colleagues to draw on specialist expertise early on, resulting in a robust outline proposal being presented to the department (e.g. market demand numbers from Marketing/SARO).

The outline proposal would address areas such as: academic rationale and viability; course content summary; course objectives; partners involved (other departments, external partners, Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (PSRBs)); market & demand (including competitors delivering similar courses); financial viability; any additional resource requirements (e.g. new staff); implications for the departmental portfolio; alignment with University/departmental strategy; potential risk areas (including the risk of not going ahead with the proposal).

The outline course approval and outline business case would be considered by the department, normally the Teaching and Learning Committee (or equivalent). Student engagement would be expected at this stage, e.g. via SSLC.

- (b) Full course proposal  
If strategic approval is given by the department to the outline proposal and business case, the course proposer produces full course proposal documentation (including course specification and external assessor's report) as well as a full business case. Full engagement of administrative sections at this stage would be required and would need to be confirmed by these sections.

The full course proposal would be scrutinised in line with departmental practices, normally by the Teaching and Learning Committee (or equivalent) and signed off by the Head of Department (or an authorised representative). The HoD's sign off would include the full business case. The proposal would then be forwarded for scrutiny and approval at University level (academic and financial separately).

2. University stage

(a) Academic approval

(i) Course proposal scrutiny

A course proposal, submitted for approval to the University, is distributed to a sub-group of the Review Panel for consideration. Members of the sub-group will be drawn from the Panel to ensure cross Faculty scrutiny, with reviewer(s) from cognate disciplines represented, and would include (where appropriate) colleagues with specialist expertise, e.g. collaborative provision.

The sub-group would be provided with a complete set of the course approval documentation to consider and comment on. The sub-group would have the following options open to it:

- (A) Recommend the proposal for approval;
- (B) Recommend the proposal for approval, subject to specific conditions being met;
- (C) Reject the proposal.

Bar recommendation for approval, the reviewers would provide comments to explain their decision and allow the department to revisit the proposal and make necessary changes (or provide a full academic rationale for any challenged aspects of the proposal).

(ii) Chair of the Review Panel

All recommendations from the Review Panel members would come to the Chair of the Review Panel. The Chair, having considered comments from the sub-group and any amendments made by the proposing department (where relevant), and having ascertained financial approval by the relevant bodies, would approve the course on behalf of the University Senate. This would constitute a formal approval, which would allow for the proposed course to be set up on SITS, a University course record generated (course regulations, course specifications, etc. published online) and the course open for applications.

The Chair of the Panel, acting on advice from the sub-group or the financial approval bodies, would be empowered to impose a 'delivery-readiness' condition on approval. In such cases, the course would be set up and could recruit, but the lead department would be required to

report back to the Chair of the Review Panel by a set deadline to confirm that any issues preventing successful delivery of the course have been removed. For example, this could be a confirmation of key staff being recruited (for courses which would require new member(s) of staff to be recruited in order to deliver the course proposed), or full course provision being in place for years two and three for an undergraduate course of study.

The 'delivery-readiness' condition deadline would be set so that, in case of a department's failure to meet specific conditions, the University would have enough time for intervention and/or withdrawal (postponement) of the new/revised course well before the arrival of student cohorts.

(b) Financial approval

The consideration of the course business case would be separate from that of the course proposal from the point of the HoD's sign-off. This is consistent with the existing course proposal system. However, it is proposed that the academic and financial approvals be joined up at the final stage of the process, and would inform the Chair of the Review Panel before approving any course proposal (and propose conditions to be set, especially in terms of 'delivery readiness').

Course Approval Process Business Process Review April 2015

Proposed New University Course Approval Process Diagram



