G2.4: Writing programme approval reports

INTRODUCTION

This guidance is intended to provide support to Faculty-based staff responsible for producing reports of programme approval events, i.e. panel chairs and officers. See also the APQO guidance on the conduct of programme approval (guidance note G2.3).

For panel secretaries, it can be a daunting task having to write a report for one of these events. You may have experience of taking minutes at committee meetings; and writing a programme approval report requires many of the same skills. However, the production of an approval event report requires a higher level of analysis than writing committee minutes because the agenda is likely to be more complex than a committee meeting, and the structure of a report differs from minutes. This guidance note is intended to help you in this, and APQO staff are also happy to advise you on any aspect of report writing. APQO group training sessions are also available – please contact your Faculty link Quality Assurance Officer for details.

This guidance note is divided roughly into two parts. The first part gives general guidance on the purpose and style of approval event reports and the articulation of panel conclusions. The second part gives more specific guidance on using the APQO template for approval reports (T2.10).

1   GENERAL GUIDANCE

1.1 Purpose of the report

The purpose of the programme approval report is to provide evidence that the University's quality assurance processes have been followed; and that they have been effective in ensuring that the academic standards of awards are set at the appropriate level and that high quality learning opportunities are secured for students (as stated in the criteria for approval in guidance note G2.3).

The programme approval panel will discuss a range of issues with the programme development team (and, probably, students) during the day and you need to draw together the notes you have made to produce a report that gives a coherent account of discussions which demonstrates that the panel has satisfied themselves that the criteria for approval have been met, or may be met by action that can be taken by the programme team within a reasonable timescale following the event, to allow for recruitment as planned (conditional approval).

The report should provide a succinct summary of the discussion that has taken place between the panel and the programme development team, capturing how any panel concerns were addressed by the programme team, any evidence of good practice worthy of commendation, and a record of any conditions or recommendations that were attached to the approval of the programme. In the event of referral or rejection of a proposal, the report should provide a clear account of the areas in which the panel was not satisfied that the approval criteria had been, or

could be, met, in order to aid the programme team in any future submission of a re-worked proposal.

The report template was shortened in 2018-19, to reduce unnecessarily lengthy reports. The template now only requires narrative to be provided in relation to commendations, conditions and recommendations, although where – for example - a PSRB requires a more detailed report, or reports for collaborative arrangements, it is still possible to include narrative under all the standard headings covered in the agenda. It is also acceptable for the Chair and Officer/Secretary to agree on any additional details which they consider should be included, beyond the minimum requirement.

1.2 Who is the report written for?

The programme approval report has several audiences…

- It provides the **panel** and the **programme team** with a summary of the salient points of the discussion at the approval event. It gives the programme team a point of reference for changes that must be actioned in order to meet any conditions of approval; and the panel Chair and the Quality Assurance Officer will use the report as a point of reference when assessing whether the documentation re-submitted by the team has been appropriately revised in accordance with the conditions.
- **Faculty AESC/QLICs** will receive reports in order to monitor the Faculty's schedule of programme approvals and ensure that conditions and recommendations are being met in a timely and appropriate manner. They will also scrutinise reports in order to identify themes for enhancement of the provision within the Faculty.
- Reports are submitted to the University **Quality & Learning Infrastructure Committee**, which confers approval on behalf of Academic Board, to provide assurance to the University about the conduct of approval panels. The Committee will monitor approval reports for consistency and appropriateness of conditions and recommendations and for evidence of good practice for wider dissemination.
- Reports may be examined by **external quality agencies**, such as professional bodies and the Quality Assurance Agency or the Office for Students, and may be drawn on in the context of future **TEF** exercises.
- The report provides a permanent record that the programme team and others may refer to at the next revalidation point, or should any queries arise regarding the delivery of the programme.

1.3 Who owns the report?

It is the panel Secretary's responsibility to produce the definitive record of the event, and ownership of the report therefore lies with this officer, but the panel Chair also has a role to play in ensuring the report provides a robust, accurate account of the discussions and conclusions. When necessary, they may provide the Secretary with any notes they have taken down at the event to fill any gaps in the Secretary's notes.

Once the draft report has been prepared, it is the Chair's responsibility to read it and advise the Secretary on any grammatical or factual inaccuracies, or on issues of tone, before it is circulated to the rest of the panel for feedback and confirmation. The advice of the link QAO who sat on the panel should also be sought prior to circulation of the report.

1.4 Style of the report

The biggest challenge in writing the report of a programme approval event is transforming the notes you have taken throughout the day into a concise account, which:

- summarises the salient points of exchanges between the panel and programme development team (under headings as appropriate to the event);

- tones down any confrontational or informal/colloquial language, but retains the overall thrust of any panel concerns;
- preserves the explanations and justifications provided by the programme development team for the decisions they have taken in the design of the new programme.

The report should be written in such a way that it demonstrates the process has been followed but it *does not* need to document the process itself (for example, by reproducing the agenda for the day) as this is set out in the Quality and Standards Handbook.

There are only a few types of paragraph in a programme approval report:
1. paragraphs capturing issues which led to the setting of conditions and recommendations (or referral/rejection points);
2. paragraphs capturing the panel's confidence in the team, which led to commendations for good practice (to assist in wider dissemination of good practice);
3. (for full reports covering the full range of standard headings) paragraphs capturing panel confidence in the arguments programme teams put forward in discussions, and recording the panel's satisfaction in the proposed arrangements (for issues which did not lead to the setting of conditions or recommendations).

The record of the discussion should be constructed along the following lines:
- What was the issue raised by the panel?
- What was the team's argument in addressing the issue?
- What conclusions did the panel draw on the basis of the evidence and the arguments presented by the team?

Try to avoid using a new paragraph number for each sentence, as this makes it difficult to follow the flow of the discussion.

Note to panel secretaries: Don't be afraid to seek clarification of any points made by the panel or the programme development team. If you feel you would benefit from improving your general note-taking skills, training is available from OCSLD. The APQO can also provide more specific advice on analytical writing for panel reports.

1.5 Conditions and recommendations

There is no hard and fast rule regarding the distinction between a condition and a recommendation, but panels need to consider carefully the consequences of a concern not being addressed. Panels should also consider the strength of the evidence underpinning a potential condition or recommendation, which needs to be reflected in the report.

Conditions should be set where essential action is required to address an issue that has the potential to put academic standards or the quality of the student experience at risk, or where action is required in order to meet the University's criteria for approval or other procedural or documentary requirements; and this action must be carried out before the programme may commence. Recommendations are more advisory in nature and refer to action that the panel feel would enhance the learning experience but where no threat is posed to academic standards.

It is important that conditions and recommendations are expressed clearly, so that it is plain to the programme teams what action they are expected to take in response (especially when a proposal has been referred and requires re-submission) – try to avoid the use of vague or generic terms such as '*review'* or '*consider'*, and also avoid technical jargon, when describing conditions and recommendations.

You should also ensure that the evidence base for the conditions and recommendations is robust and clear in the record of the discussion, and each point must be referenced back to the relevant paragraph/s in the report.

1.6 Commendations

Commendations should relate to action that is being taken by a programme team which the panel considers to be having a particularly positive effect on the quality of teaching and learning in the context of the provision. Try to articulate the commendations to be specific about the good practice identified by the panel to enable other programme teams in the Faculty to learn from practice in the area under consideration. Avoid generic commendations, such as those which refer to good relationships between staff and students or to the quality of documentation – remember that more specific commendations assist QLIC and Faculty QLIC/AESCs in the dissemination of good practice and therefore improving practice in teaching, assessing and supporting learning across the University.

2   THE REPORT TEMPLATE

To assist panel officers in producing a record of the approval event, a template is available to download from the APQO website (T2.10). Please refer to the guidance notes attached to the report template when completing the report – some guidance notes are also contained (in red) within the template, and the link QAO for your Faculty can offer additional advice on completing the template if necessary. The same template may be used for events convened to consider major revisions to existing provision, but you may need to tailor the report to fit the particular nature of the revisions being proposed.

The draft report should be checked by the Faculty's link QAO and submitted to the Chair for approval within two working weeks of the event. Once the Chair is satisfied with the report, it should be classified as 'Chair's Approved Draft' and sent to the rest of the panel for their approval; and to the programme development team for comments on factual accuracy. Once the report has been confirmed through this process (this should be within one month of the event) it should be submitted to Faculty AESC/QLICs and University QLIC via the Faculty's link QAO.