

**LTC09D100**

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**Background**

As the Committee will recall, following Restructuring and a Review of the governance arrangements for quality assurance and enhancement processes, Faculty Learning, Teaching and Quality Committees and Associate Deans for Learning, Teaching and Quality, were charged with undertaking the approval of new course approvals both in principle and in detail (where a new award is proposed approval by LTC is required, and where a subject area is new to either the University or to the School approvals outside the Faculty are still required). New course approvals cover a range from the amendment of a course title, through the creation of a new course by combining existing modules into a new profile, to the creation of a completely new programme structure.

Faculty LTQCs are required to report to the Committee on the full range of course approvals, whether modifications such as a change in course title, significant modifications to existing courses, the creation of new courses from existing modules or substantially new programmes. Whilst these reports are normally made under Section C of the agenda, members of the Committee are able to request that items are moved to Section A should there appear to be issues to be discussed by the Committee. As the Committee will recall, there has been recent consideration of a number of new award titles and the Committee continues to keep a careful watch on the proliferation of awards, as well as maintaining an interest in the development of distance learning and other innovative course design.

At the same time as the University reviewed and revised the arrangements for approving new courses, we also revisited the new course approval procedure, to ensure that it adequately recognised the resource implications of even small changes, espoused early liaison between Schools and central services, and ensured that we offer a coherent portfolio of courses. The previous arrangements had required some central services to be advised of a new proposal, but only at the end of the process, and in practice this was not consistently undertaken. The new procedure promotes early consultation to ensure that resources are in place to support new students and a quality learning experience, and also to ensure that new proposals fitted within School and Faculty plans.

**Audit**

As the approval of new courses is a function delegated to Faculties by the Learning and Teaching Committee, the Learning, Teaching and Quality Office undertake periodic audits of Faculty files to review the operation of the process and identify areas of good practice. Such an audit was undertaken in February 2010 and covered new course approvals (fast-track and full) in 2008/9 and 2009/10 (to date).

The comments that follow are based on information contained within Faculty Learning, Teaching and Quality Committee files and conversations with the Secretaries to FLTQCs.

## Areas of Good Practice

- Drafting of a schedule within SCI working back from deadlines for publication of prospectuses, setting deadlines for consideration of proposals within the Faculty.
- Spreadsheet within HUM listing all new courses in development, shared between Teaching Office, Admissions and Local Support.
- Annotation of proposal documentation or other documentation providing evidence of critical review of proposals.
- Faculty files which clearly document external consultation, dialogue between FLTQC and course proposers and any matters relating to the proposal.
- Fully costed business plans in FOH.

## Operation of the Procedure

Three of the Faculty LTQCs operate a process whereby a sub-group of the Committee, usually comprised of two members, undertakes a critical read of a new course proposal and makes a recommendation to the Committee. In the other Faculty (HUM) proposals are considered by the FLTQC as a whole. Where adopted, the use of a sub-group of the Committee ensures appropriate and robust scrutiny of proposals, whilst making efficient use of Committee members' time (similar sub-groups also operate for other quality assurance and enhancement functions, such as the scrutiny of responses to external examiners' reports). The use of sub-groups sits comfortably with the PVC (Academic)'s request that FLTQCs consider how they might release time to consider more strategic matters – as FOH explicitly noted. In some cases, where a new course proposal could be considered under fast-track arrangements (representing an amendment to the title of an existing course or the broadening of a portfolio of courses by creating a new combination of modules, with no resource implications) the proposal is considered and approved by the Associate Dean. Where the Associate Dean is a member of the School proposing the new course arrangements have been put in place for another member of FLTQC to act in their place.

Special arrangements are in place within the Faculty of Health, where a large proportion of new courses or amendments to existing courses are subject to PSRB approval and require validation or accreditation as part of the approval process. Where a validation process by a PSRB is required the FLTQC undertakes a critical read of the course documentation and confirms that it is satisfied that the course meets our academic requirements prior to submission to the relevant PSRB.

One Faculty (SSF) maintains separate files dedicated to each new course approval. The other Faculties integrate records of course approvals into the FLTQC files, either as part of the agenda papers or as a sub-section of the minute book. The former approach may lend itself to more comprehensive record keeping.

During the past two academic years (2008/9 and 2009/10) the four Faculties have each adopted a different approach to new course approvals within the underpinning procedure laid down by the Learning and Teaching Committee. The Learning, Teaching and Quality Office has been working with the SIS Project Team on the development of a new electronic resource, Process Manager, which will support and automate many of the steps involved in the approvals process. The construction of Process Manager has taken much longer than anticipated, due to the complexity of the process and therefore implementation of a new system and new proforma to support the process has been delayed. The delay in the implementation of Process Manager has, regrettably, left a gap which has permitted variation in practice and some omissions in process.

The Faculty of Social Sciences piloted a paper-based version of the new course approval process being developed within Process Manager. The Faculty of Arts and Humanities has recently moved onto the new proforma. Meanwhile the Faculties of Health and Science have retained the former course proposal document, pending roll out of Process Manager in 2010/11. Noting that the former course proposal document does not fully support and guide Faculty LTQCs through the revised procedure approved by LTC, the Learning, Teaching and

Quality Office is making available an updated proforma, which whilst still paper-based maps more closely onto the new procedure.

The audit of new courses indicates that there may need to be enhanced guidance in respect of what constitutes a fast-track approval and what requires full consideration (further supplementing the guidance already available through the Code of Practice). The key principle established for some time by LTC is that a fast-track proposal should have no resource implications. Further guidance on how to interpret this may be required, taking into consideration the resource impact of changes to assessment patterns, teaching accommodation, student administration and library resources amongst others. Even where undergraduate and Masters provision is bolted together to create new integrated Masters programmes, with no new student numbers, for example, there are implications for a range of internal stakeholders. Similarly, increasing the number of taught modules that a student must take where there are no additional student numbers and where no new modules will be created still have an implication for mark processing and module timetabling.

There was clear evidence from all four Faculties of critical engagement between the FLTQC (or its sub-group) and the course proposers. This was most commonly represented by memoranda from the FLTQC to the course proposers identifying issues which should be addressed within the proposal documentation, or in annotated (through tracked changes and comment boxes) versions of the course proposal documentation.

#### Consultation with external stakeholders

A requirement for there to be written evidence of consultation with external stakeholders (for example, external examiners and employers) for all new course approvals, including fast-track approvals, was introduced in 2009. Unsurprisingly, the clearest evidence of such consultation was found in the Faculty of Health, where new courses are often developed in response to a direct request from a professional body or local employers. The files in the Faculty of Social Sciences included copies of correspondence with external examiners confirming their support for new proposals. The records within the Faculties of Science and of Arts and Humanities were less readily auditable. The attention of both Faculties has been drawn to this matter. Both Faculties are aware of the requirement and will review their record keeping procedures.

#### Business Case

Consideration of the business case for developing a new course is undertaken by the Faculty Executive, which appears to have resulted in the records of approvals being kept in separate files from FLTQC papers (with the exception of the most recent files in HUM). The adoption of the new proforma within Process Manager will hopefully address this. The Faculty of Health appeared to have a thorough procedure in place, with the Faculty Finance Manager preparing a very detailed and costed plan for new course proposals. Elsewhere section B1 (Summary) of the old proforma appears to have been used by some Schools as an opportunity to set out the rationale for a new course. The mechanisms by which these have been considered and the record of the flow of information from the Faculty Executive to the FLTQC could be improved. Process Manager will address this issue.

Given the freeze on additional student numbers, the majority of new course proposals (with the exception of those based on external teaching contracts or premium fees) represent a strategy of enhancing the School's portfolio by designing new courses in order to attract high quality students within existing numbers. There was, however, some evidence that Schools had not necessarily taken student numbers into consideration when putting together a new course proposal. There were some examples where Schools had been explicit about creating the course to ensure that they met existing student targets, whereas elsewhere it was less clear and the Head of the Planning Office had had to comment that no new numbers were available.

## Consultation with Admissions

The new approvals process has sought to ensure a much closer relationship between Marketing and Admissions Services, Faculty Admissions Managers and those developing and approving new courses, whether name changes, new combinations or something new. This parallels the more strategic approach to course development, supported by a cycle of market research, being undertaken by RAMC.

Within FLTQC files there were some examples of new proposals including information from market research exercises (mostly undertaken by Schools rather than the Faculty admissions team or MAS). However, in general there is little evidence of Faculty or central admissions teams being consulted or involved in new course approvals. Some of the proposals appear to be quite significant in terms of impact on recruitment (for example, developing four-year integrated masters in place of three-year bachelor degrees) and it is unclear from the documentation the extent to which Admissions teams were aware of or involved in the decision making process. Again, the implementation of Process Manager will require this interaction to take place.

Interestingly, there was an example in one Faculty's files of a recently approved course which then required amendments because it did not match the requirements of its target audience. Elsewhere approval was given for amendments to a course, apparently without consideration of the timing within the admissions cycle and the position of students who had been offered places, since the Faculty Admissions Manager had to remind the School of the requirement to liaise with students holding offers.

The Faculty of Arts and Humanities is currently implementing a new information sharing process by which the Faculty Managers for Teaching Office, Admissions and Local Support share regular and frequent reports of courses in development. This is aimed at ensuring that Admissions have early notification of all changes and are aware of what is in the pipeline, as well as ensuring that all three areas work together. Other Faculties may wish to consider whether a similar scheme would be of benefit to them.

## Consultation with Library

There was minimal evidence within the documentation available of consultation or liaison with the Library. In the majority of cases the new course proposals represented the repackaging of existing modules or courses, with apparently no additional draws on library resources / book stocks. The use of Process Manager will ensure that such consultation takes place.

## Consultation with other stakeholders

The revised procedure for the approval of new courses listed a number of internal stakeholders who should be consulted as part of the process or at least informed of the proposals. In addition to MAS and LIB these include CCEN, DoS, and Accommodation (now within DoS). Perhaps due to the nature of the new courses approved during this period or some lack of understanding as to the purposes of the procedure. There could have been stronger evidence of consultation with central services. There was some evidence of consultation with the Careers Service and for some courses there was evidence of direct engagement with employers. In a further couple of cases there was evidence of a dialogue between the Dean of Students' Office and the School. Once again, the introduction of Process Manager will aid the more effective operation of these consultations.

## Joint Courses

As the Committee will recall, issues relating to the experience of students on joint courses, where modules are owned by different Schools, have been raised through the National Student Survey and by student representatives. The report on the QAA Institutional Audit 2009 identified the experience of students on joint programmes as an issue for further review and consideration - primarily focused on information, but also encompassing the management of learning opportunities (paragraph 60). The revised new course approval documentation

asks Schools to comment on how the experience of students on joint courses will be managed. Where joint courses had been approved in 2008/9 and 2009/10 there was little clear indication of how Schools had addressed this issue. The exception to this was a proposal within HUM for a new course combining a language and film and television studies, where the course proposal commented on the use of modules as an integrating mechanism. This did not, perhaps, fully address the issues raised by students in respect of the management of existing joint courses, but is evidence that the course proposers were considering how the relationship between language and film should be addressed within the course structure. Process Manger will continue to require evidence of consideration of this aspect of joint courses. The Committee may wish to give further consideration to the mechanisms by which the enhancement of the experience of students on joint courses can be built into the new course approval process as part of its ongoing consideration of joint course issues.

#### Placement Learning

Some of the new courses approved during the audited period incorporated placement learning. The Faculty LTQC assured itself that the School concerned was aware of and compliant with the University's Code of Practice, but the documentation reviewed did not give a sufficient indication of the mechanisms through which the Faculty assured itself that sufficient placement opportunities existed or that contingency plans were in place.

#### Conclusions

- There is evidence of robust academic approval of new courses, including a critical dialogue between FLTQCs and Schools.
- There is less clear evidence of full consideration of the resource implications of new course proposals or of liaison with all internal stakeholders.
- For some new course proposals there is substantial evidence of working with external stakeholders, and specifically employers, to develop new courses that meet external requirements.
- Further guidance on procedural matters would appear to be helpful, but should be offered by the implementation of Process Manager.