SCHOOL REVIEWS: OVERVIEW FOR EXTERNAL REVIEWERS

Purpose
The University reviews its academic schools once every six years through a rigorous review process that normally takes place over one-and-a-half days and is carried out by a team of internal and external reviewers. One of the University’s Pro Vice-Chancellors will be the Chair of the Review Panel.

The objectives of the school review process are as follows:

a) to assure the University that its Schools have appropriate strategies in place, deliver high quality teaching and research, that they are delivering a positive student experience, and that they are working effectively in terms of staffing and financial matters;
b) to assist the University, Faculties and Schools in identifying and evaluating strengths or weaknesses in:
   - learning, teaching and assessment (including partnerships/collaborations, UK and Overseas)
   - research & entrepreneurship, engagement & research collaborations, UK and Overseas
   - academic staff management and the student experience
   - planning, resource management, including space, and administration, including systems
   - (where appropriate) clinical work/provision of clinical service

c) to be part of the robust academic quality management and enhancement process mechanism acceptable to external audit requirements including assuring the University that all its academic programmes are current and valid;
d) to improve School and institutional effectiveness and efficiency in relation to academic performance;
e) to identify examples of good practice, areas for improvement and, where necessary, to recommend that schools are given appropriate support to make changes and;
f) to review all academic Schools in a rolling, six yearly cycle

Process
The School Review process is described in the ‘School Review Guidelines’ document\(^1\). The reviews will be appropriately resourced and supported by the Governance and Planning teams in the Strategic Planning & Projects Office.

The self-evaluation process and resulting SED, is a critically important element of the review, and its preparation should engage as many people as possible. This element of the review will be given significant weight by the Panel. Each reviewer is therefore expected to have read this document thoroughly (and may wish to ask follow up, factual questions prior to the review itself). The SED should, wherever possible, include benchmarking information for comparison with similar Schools at other institutions and it is expected that external reviewers may be able to offer valuable insight in benchmarking against their own experience or institution.

\(^1\) Available at [http://www.bristol.ac.uk/university/governance/](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/university/governance/) under ‘Reviews’ or from the Governance team: governance@bristol.ac.uk
External/independent challenge and validation is a key element of every review and so the role of the external reviewer is important in the school review process. Each review usually includes two external reviewers with strong credentials and experience in the area under review. The external reviewers prompt Schools and the University to address issues that may come to light during the school review process, and to facilitate an institutional, faculty and school response to the review.

The School prepares a Self-Evaluation Document (SED) focussing on central issues facing the School, good practice, effectiveness, and it should emphasise future plans including student numbers, programme development, research and entrepreneurship and financial projections. It must contain an analysis of strengths, weaknesses and ability to meet objectives.

Normally the review programme will start with an initial meeting of the panel to discuss specific themes and issues for consideration during the review, then on the evening of the first day the review panel will meet over dinner to discuss the day and to plan for the second day. The review programme will normally include the following elements:

- meetings with a representative and balanced group of students (undergraduate and graduates), effectively utilising the Course Representatives system
- meeting with the school senior management team
- meeting with Faculty staff (and other appropriate staff relevant to the review e.g. BDC Director, where there is a Doctoral Training Entity presence within the school)
- meetings to discuss education and the student experience (UG and PG)
- meeting to discuss research, entrepreneurship and engagement
- tour of facilities (which may include library, laboratory or other relevant resources as appropriate)

The SED, supporting information/data and the review agenda/programme are sent to the Panel circa 3 weeks prior to the review taking place.

**Key responsibilities of the External Reviewer**

- External reviewers, as recognised experts in their fields, should be entirely independent and professionally objective.
- They should provide critical judgement, ensure the objectivity of the review process, and help to determine how the school compares to similar schools they have had experience of.
- External Reviewers should bring an informed and unbiased view to the assessment of the School and should judge whether the plans of the School are appropriate, considering such factors as the current condition of the School, trends in that particular area, the nature of the School, and the characteristics of the stakeholders/customers it serves.
- External Reviewers are expected to take a proactive role in the Review process, in particular, in taking the lead on directing discussions during Review sessions, with the support of the Chair, and engaging actively with Panel discussions and forming recommendations from the Review.

All reviewers will be provided with a list of key themes/issues prior to the review and these (including any additional themes/issues arising more recently) are discussed at the very beginning of the review. External reviewers are free to address other issues that arise during the course of their review.
After the review
The review report and recommendations from the panel will be produced approximately within 3 months of review by Panel Chair and Review Coordinator and with input from the Panel. It is then submitted to the University Management Team (UMT) for approval. From the review report, a prioritised response to the review (an Action Plan), based on the review recommendations, will be prepared by the School and presented to the University Management Team (UMT) 9 months after the review has taken place. The action plan will be monitored closely by the Head of School, the Dean and the Review Panel Chair.