Guidance document for staff on programme changes

setu.ie

Ollscoil Teicneolaíochta an Oirdheiscirt
South East Technological University

Frequently Asked Questions on Programme Changes

What documents should I consider when looking at making a programme or module change?

This guidance document is relevant, as well as the Programme Development and Validation Policy and the Programme Development and Validation Procedure.

Who is this document relevant to?

This document is intended as a guide for staff regarding the SETU approach to programme changes (to include major and non-major awards and individual modules).

What is addressed in this document?

General guidance is initially provided on programme changes, before information about the two specific programme change processes (Programme Modifications and Minor Changes) is outlined. A flowchart of the overall programme process is then provided, as well as the outline headings separately for a Programme Modification proposal and Minor Changes proposal which should be utilised.

Is there support available when making programme changes?

A key support for matters relating to programme changes is the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, Teaching and Learning.

Who can I contact if I have any questions on this document or on programme changes generally?

Please contact Dr Paul O'Leary who is the Head of Quality Promotion and Academic Policy Development in the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, Teaching and Learning.

Guidance document for staff on programme changes

Note – A summary flowchart of the programme change processes is set out in Appendix 1 of this document.

Introduction and context

SETU has developed a policy and procedure to guide the development, validation and approval of new programmes in the University, which also addresses changes[1] to programmes. The University recognises that programme changes are a natural and expected occurrence to reflect the ongoing evolution in different disciplines and areas, emergent thinking and approaches, the needs of students and graduates, and the value of revitalising and updating curricula. This is encouraged by SETU within appropriate governance parameters, acknowledging that programme changes can have implications for various stakeholders, systems and outcomes, and thus must be supported by evidence of need and/or enhancement. The term 'programme changes' is used here and in other documents to refer to any change to a programme – this could be to the programme itself or to individual modules of the programme.

The ultimate approver of programmes – and thus of changes to programmes - is Academic Council and no change can be made without Council approval. There are also various bodies, groups and roles involved in the overall process, including Programme Boards who instigate change proposals. It is acknowledged that programme change can be a complex task for those involved and particularly those who develop proposals, and that support is necessary. Part of this support (along with relevant training, guidance and advice) is the current document.

This document is intended as a guide for staff regarding the SETU approach to programme changes (to include major[2] and non-major awards and individual modules). It should be read in conjunction with the Programme Development and Validation Policy ('the policy') and the Programme Development and Validation Procedure ('the procedure') documents which contain essential information on this topic and what is required. In this context, the guidance document is a necessarily abbreviated version of certain points for staff involved with programme changes and should not be relied upon exclusively for programme changes.

Further information and guidance regarding the processes in this document and in the policy and the procedure can be obtained from Dr Paul O'Leary (Head of Quality Promotion and Academic Policy Development, Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, Teaching and Learning (OVPAA)).

[1] The types of changes that are addressed by this guidance document are ongoing changes to programmes, as opposed to changes that arise as part of periodic programmatic review. Programmatic review is addressed as part of Academic Unit Review (see Academic Unit Reviews Policy).
[2] Embedded awards are also included.

Programme change processes

The University has two processes for programme changes under the policy and the procedure:

1. Programme modification process
2. Minor changes process

Before these are addressed more specifically, firstly some general guidance on programme changes is provided here.

General guidance on programme changes

Anyone who is seeking to make programme changes should consult the procedure document and, in particular, sections 50 to 78 as relevant. Sections 50 to 59 set out general principles which apply across both processes and are the focus of this part of the guidance document.

An important point with regard to programme changes is that changes require reasonable justification. This means that there should be a strong and evidenced rationale as to why the change is warranted. An example of this could be that a change in assessment from examination to continuous assessment is warranted because it is more compatible with the learning outcomes or is more reflective of trends/thinking in the subject area. This can potentially be evidenced from:

- the Programme Boards consideration of the outcomes of assessment on the module;
- student engagement and feedback on the assessment of the module;
- external examiner engagement and feedback regarding the module;
- disciplinary or sectoral trends;
- or other similarly strong sources.

By doing this, the Programme Board is demonstrating that the change is an enhancement, is of value to students, and/or is in line with current thinking. What is sufficient evidence will depend on the extent and complexity of the change. Fundamental changes to programmes are likely to require substantive engagements with stakeholders which could include (for example) other Faculties and programmes, students, prospective employers, and PSRB[3]s. Less fundamental changes should also warrant stakeholder engagement, which could be with similar groupings though possibly with a narrower focus. These are decisions for Programme Boards to consider, who can seek advice from the OVPAA based on their experience.

Communication on programme changes is critical, both during and after the process. Stakeholders need to be informed of changes that are being considered so that they can feed in to the proposals. This both strengthens the proposal and also helps to ensure that

[3] Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body

when implemented, there is less risk of unanticipated issues arising. Again, the stakeholders who should be involved will depend on the change, but almost always will include those students and lecturing staff directly involved with the programme or module. An important aspect here is the transitional implications of any changes for existing students, including repeat students, and Programme Boards need to ensure that any implementation plan for a change protects students and their needs. For example, moving a module from Year 2 to Year 3 of a programme may be strongly justified, but the Programme Board must make sure that students seeking external accreditation are not disadvantaged by clarifying this to the relevant PSRB and planning for this in their proposal. Similarly, changes to a module that could impact legacy repeat students (who may not be currently registered) need to be communicated appropriately to such students to allow them to take any necessary actions. Again, an appropriate plan around this needs to be in place in the proposal. When changes are fully approved and implemented, Programme Boards must ensure that those who need to know are aware of the change by updating student materials (e.g., Programme Handbook) and any other relevant materials that they maintain (e.g., Programme Assessment Schedules).

Programme Boards should consider the fact that modules that they seek to change may be shared with other programmes (within the Faculty and/or in other Faculties) and thus those Programme Boards – and related students/staff – must be consulted. Mutual agreement on the change must be reached and made by all affected Programme Boards, and this should be reflected in the proposal being made.

The effective date of the change being requested is an important consideration and key information for any proposal, and affects implementation. The requirements here differ by change process (and will be addressed more specifically later in this guidance document). However, a key principle here is that changes must be prospective only; retrospective changes are not permitted aside from in very exceptional circumstances and for valid reasons. This is because changes, as already indicated, have to be planned for and communicated on so that everyone affected is clear on what is expected and required of them including students and staff. As this document shows, there is a governance process to approve changes that must be followed. This takes time and documentation must be submitted by specific dates for scheduled meetings to allow for the appropriate consideration of proposals. This should be factored in by Programme Boards in their decision making and their own timelines regarding changes.

Programme changes may have resource implications and these need to be considered by the University as part of the approvals process. This is to ensure that the University manages resources and costs in the most effective and efficient manner possible. To achieve this aim, Programme Boards need to identify if their proposed changes are expected to affect resources and communicate this to the Faculty in advance of submission. The Faculty Management Team will then have to review the proposed change to determine if the Faculty are willing to support this in resource terms and thus to allow the proposal to proceed further. Consultation with Finance by the Faculty Management Team should take place if resources are expected to be affected to allow for accurate costings and estimates, unless

the Faculty Management Team are happy to undertake this assessment themselves. The greater challenge here may be the identification that resources are expected to be impacted and being cognisant of this possibility as it may not be immediately obvious. Indicators of this would be where programme changes require changes to contact hours, additional equipment or facilities, additional external involvement, or further staff training and development, but there may be others. The Programme Board and Faculty Management Team are central to identifying these as appropriate. It should be noted that a programme change that calls for additional resources may not have cost implications as the resources may already be available and not in use; Finance involvement here can help to identify this. Either way, this is an important check that may be needed for certain changes and Programme Boards and Faculty Management Teams should engage on this as appropriate.

An important point to note is that support is available to staff to help them to navigate these various elements, as changes are best managed through collaborative work where possible. This can be achieved through training in the policy and the procedure and through engagement with or guidance provided by the OVPAA/Finance when requested. In this context, it is important that Programme Boards and Faculty Management Teams avail of any guidance and support early and as required. Programme Boards need to ensure the accuracy, completeness, clarity and quality of their proposals when submitting them through either process, and availing of relevant supports is valuable here. The guidance document now turns to the specific processes, starting with Programme Modifications.

Programme Modifications[4]

Under the policy and the procedure, a programme modification is defined as 'a programme change that is not considered to be a minor change'. In this regard, the types of changes that should be addressed through this process would tend to be more substantial or significant in nature (individually or collectively within a programme). Considering the definition of what is a minor change (set out in the next section of this guidance document) and what is excluded from minor changes, programme modifications would include changes that impact programme learning outcomes or the meeting of programme academic standards. Additionally, arising from section 68 of the procedure, programme modifications would include changes that affect fundamental characteristics of a programme, such as its title, its programme learning outcomes, the aims and objectives of the programme, the level of the programme, or that require multiple changes to the programme documentation. Where Programme Boards seek to make frequent minor changes to programmes, they may also be requested to use the programme modification process for any further changes.

If there is any uncertainty as to whether a programme modification is the appropriate process, the Programme Board should – as already noted – consult with the OVPAA. Indeed,

[4] Appendix 2 contains the 'Programme Modification Proposal: Outline Headings' document for programme modifications which can be added to by the Programme Board and varied by OVPAA as necessary. This should be part of the proposal documentation that is submitted by the Programme Board under the Programme Modification Process.

the OVPAA has a key role in the programme modification process as they also determine the appropriate route to follow which will stem from the nature of the modifications that are being proposed. Thus, early and clear engagement with the OVPAA is important as there are various options open in terms of the best way to manage the review of such changes and these are noted in the procedure. The OVPAA will be cognisant of many factors including:

- the complexity of the change;
- the magnitude of the change;
- the implications for stakeholders;
- the need for expert guidance on the proposal (internal and/or external);
- how similar changes were previously managed;
- and achieving an efficient and effective process and outcome.

This could necessitate a full Panel review, a desk review or appropriate variations on these. The Programme Board will be informed by the OVPAA as to what is required and any particular arrangements.

To support an effective programme modification process, documentation submitted to a Panel/reviewer must be complete, accurate, internally consistent, and professionally presented. In this context, some examples of areas that Programme Boards should consider include:

- ensuring that all documents are fully proof-read;
- ensuring that the presentation of documents is of a high standard;
- ensuring that weblinks in documents are correct;
- ensuring that statements made are substantiated where appropriate and that the information provided throughout the documents is accurate and consistent;
- ensuring that learning outcomes are appropriate;
- ensuring that documents are provided in accordance with any timelines specified by the OVPAA;
- ensuring that where derogations from Academic Council are being sought, this is clearly stated.

The OVPAA will support and engage with Programme Boards on documentation by providing advice and relevant feedback pre-submission on intended documents, and will also address any queries that Programme Boards may have in this regard. The overall goal with documentation is to ensure that the best possible document(s) is presented to the Panel/reviewer in an efficient and timely manner. This should help to facilitate a successful process being conducted as scheduled to meet the Programme Board's and/or Faculty's own intended timelines with regard to programme changes being implemented.

At the conclusion of whatever review process was determined as necessary, the Programme Board and the OVPAA will need to provide final documentation (see section 61 of the procedure) to the Taught Studies Programmes, Teaching and Learning Committee ('the Committee') who will consider this and make their recommendation to Council. An important consideration for Programme Boards under this process is that the effective date

of any changes can only be in a subsequent academic year and not within the current academic year. Given the significance of the changes, this is understandable and allows time for communications on approved changes to be made in a planned manner e.g., alerting a new intake of students with regard to a programme title change as well as marketing, school liaison, web development and admissions teams.

Minor Changes[5]

The policy and procedure define minor changes as 'a change that does not impact programme learning outcomes or the meeting of programme academic standards, and which is limited both in frequency and volume'. This sets the University parameters for such changes and needs to be interpreted in the context of what is being proposed. The intent here is that minor changes are the types of changes that would be made to programmes and modules to keep them up-to-date and contemporary, but which should not fundamentally impact or amend the programme. This needs to be considered not only in the context of a single proposed change but taking all changes together (proposed and completed) that are made outside of either a programmatic review or programme modification process. Section 67 of the procedure sets out examples of changes that may be permitted as 'minor', while section 68 provides some guidance on what would not be considered 'minor'.

The University needs to ensure that the programme that is validated with external, independent and expert input fundamentally sustains. If the programme needs to fundamentally change, this can be proposed (through programmatic review or programme modification) but should not be made through a minor change process as that is not the intent of the process. Consequently, careful monitoring of the volume and frequency of minor change requests is undertaken to ensure this and section 69 of the procedure is important here[6]. For Programme Boards, the best way to ensure that a minor change is the correct route is through consulting the documentation (policy, procedure and guidance) and engaging with the OVPAA and/or Faculty sub-committee as appropriate[7] for advice.

There are two ways in which minor changes can be processed and approved in SETU – either through a Faculty programmes sub-committee in the first instance or through the Taught Studies Programmes, Teaching and Learning Committee ('the Committee') directly. It is important to note that, in both cases, the final approval of any change rests with Academic

[5] Appendix 3 contains the 'Minor Changes Proposal: Outline Headings' document for minor changes. This should be part of the proposal documentation that is submitted by the Programme Board under the Minor Changes Process.

[6] As noted in section 69 of the procedure, 'Definitive limits are not being set for this' in the context of volume or frequency. This is because prescriptive limits may have unintended consequences in different circumstances or situations. In this context, Programme Boards are asked to ensure that minor changes are appropriately managed and monitored by them for reasons explained above, which will also be monitored by the Taught Studies Programmes, Teaching and Learning Committee and Faculty sub-committees as appropriate.

[7] This will depend on whether the Faculty has sought delegation on minor changes or not (which will be discussed further below). Where they have, the Faculty sub-committee should be engaged with in the first instance. If Programme Boards wish to check if this is the case, they should consult with the relevant Head of Department to establish what is within the scope of any Faculty sub-committee in place.

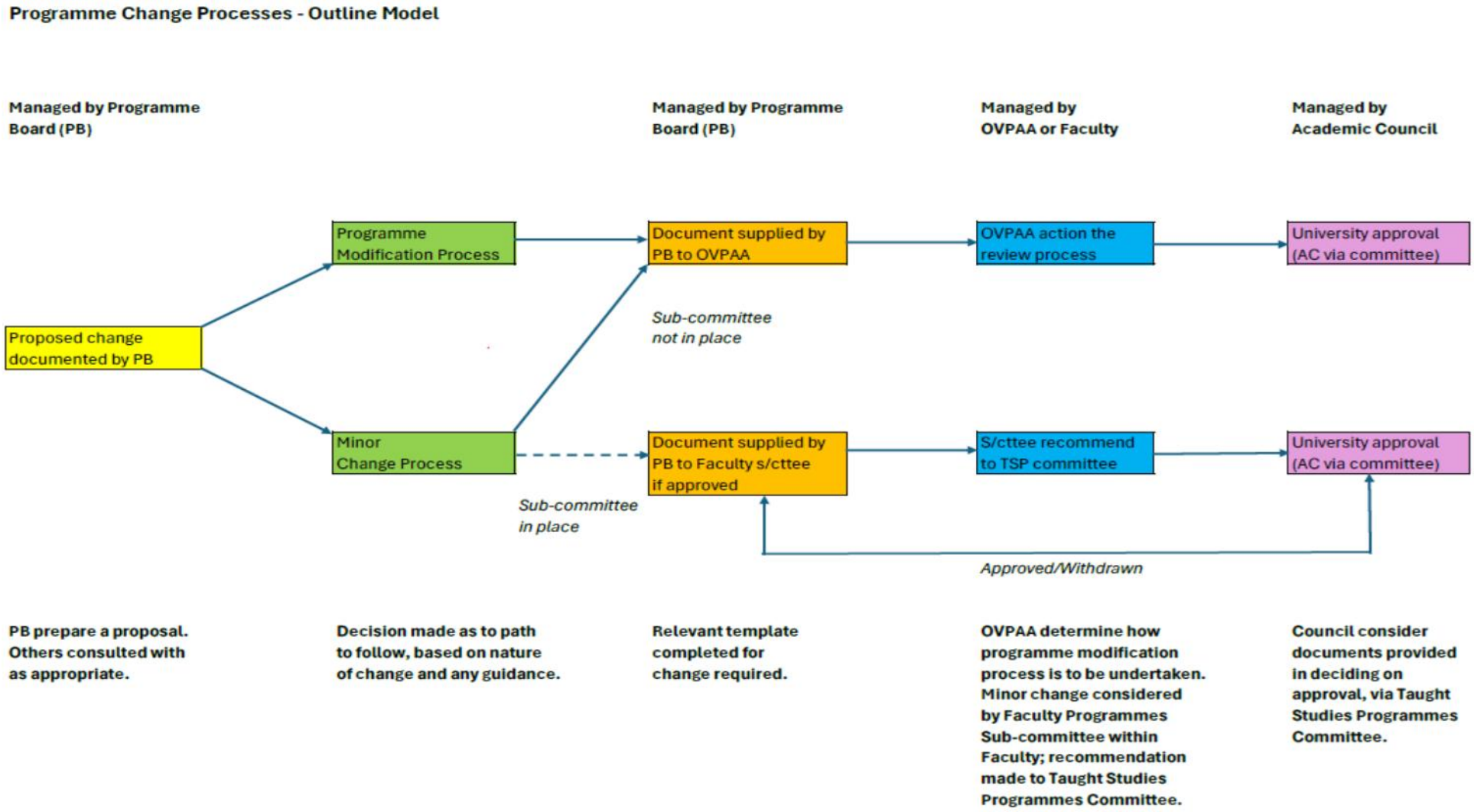
Council who will consider recommendations made by the Committee. This means that a minor change cannot be put in place until formal Council approval is granted and this needs to be carefully considered by Programme Boards in their own timelines. Typically, minor changes should only be made with an effective date in the following semester or later than this. Bodies involved in the process meet according to schedules set each year and documentation needs to be submitted in time to make the next meeting. In addition, documentation submitted needs to be complete, clear and understandable so that decisions can be made based on the relevant information. Experience shows that where documentation is not, this can give rise to queries or the return of documentation, which delays a decision. Examples of issues that arise with documents can include programme schedules not being updated, transition plans not fully considered or specified, dates of the change not specified or appropriate, and other affected programmes not considered. Early engagement with the OVPAA and/or Faculty sub-committee as appropriate can help here in terms of understanding timelines and documentation expectations.

The procedure document (sections 65 to 78) is essential reading on the minor change process. Faculties are encouraged to seek delegation to make recommendations on minor changes as part of a move to give greater autonomy over quality assurance activities, and a separate University process has been developed to facilitate this. Where approved by the Committee, a Faculty sub-committee will consider minor change requests[8] and will make recommendations on these to the Committee once per semester (section 74 of the procedure). The Committee is then responsible for making recommendations to Academic Council for their consideration and, where appropriate, approval. Faculties should communicate the arrangements and processes pertaining to their own sub-committees to their Programme Boards, including how proposals are submitted and when meetings take place. A key communication that needs to be considered is on the outcomes of the sub-committee's recommendations and the requirements here are specified in section 76 of the procedure, which requires relevant information being sent to the proposing Programme Board and the OVPAA. In the absence of these communications, changes cannot be properly processed and may be delayed.

As already noted above, minor change proposals which are not considered by a Faculty sub-committee (because they are outside of the approved scope of the sub-committee or no sub-committee has been established) should be sent to the Taught Studies Programmes, Teaching and Learning Committee via the secretariat when they are ready for submission. The Committee considers any proposals (typically) at one meeting per semester and the dates of these meetings are communicated to Faculties by the Committee. Again, all minor changes require Academic Council approval before they can be implemented.

[8] Faculties do not have to address all minor changes, but can specify in their application for delegation what minor changes they wish to consider through the sub-committee. The Faculty is responsible for communicating relevant information on this to Programme Boards. All other minor change requests will be made to and considered by the Committee.

Appendix 1 - Summary flow chart of the programme change processes



Appendix 2 - Programme Modification Proposal: Outline Headings

Note 1: Where embedded awards are part of any proposed modification, relevant information for any associated modifications for these awards must also be clearly specified which will – at a minimum, as appropriate – be for each embedded award related to:

Programme Title; Programme Schedule; Programme Rationale; Programme Description; Programme Aims/Objectives; Programme Learning Outcomes (with mapping as set out); Programme Entry Requirements; Transfer Pathways; Employability.

Note 2 – Under the relevant headings below, where there is no modification to the Programme, this should be stated along with the current information.

Note 3 – The headings below may be tailored by the Office of the Vice President for Academic Affairs, Teaching and Learning as necessary depending on the nature of the proposed programme modification and process required for addressing this.

Section 1 – Basic Information

Programme Title (Current and Proposed Revised)

Stage(s) and Semester(s) Affected

Other Programme(s) Affected (if applicable, with confirmation from same)

Department

Faculty

Faculty Contacts for Programme Modification Process

Section 2 - Programme Schedule – Current and Proposed Revised Separately (Changes Highlighted)

Standard SETU templates completed

Section 3 – Proposed Programme Modification

Narrative section, completed by Programme Board in sufficient detail to allow for an appropriate review, which should typically address (and which can be added to as appropriate):

- Programme Modification Rationale
- Programme Modification Description
- Effective Date of Programme Modification
- Stakeholder Engagement on Programme Modification
- Programme Aims/Objectives (Current and Proposed Revised Separately; Changes Highlighted)
- Programme Learning Outcomes (Current and Proposed Revised Separately; Changes Highlighted):
    - Mapped to SETU Award Standards
    - Mapped from Module Learning Outcomes
    - Mapped to Professional Accreditation Criteria (where relevant)
- Programme Approaches to Teaching and Learning, including Feedback to Students (Current and Proposed Revised Separately; Changes Highlighted)
- Programme Assessment Strategy (Current and Proposed Revised Separately; Changes Highlighted)
- Programme Entry Requirements (Current and Proposed Revised Separately; Changes Highlighted)
- Transfer Pathways (Current and Proposed Revised Separately; Changes Highlighted)
- Graduate Opportunities (Current and Proposed Revised Separately; Changes Highlighted)
    - Progression
    - Employability
- Special Regulations (if any - Current and Proposed Revised Separately; Changes Highlighted)
- Programme Commentary on Any Consequent Changes Required to Resources (with confirmation of Faculty Management Team approval)
- External Accreditation Requirements (if any) for Any Changes Proposed and Plan for This
- Appendices
    - Module Descriptors (Current and Proposed Revised Separately; Changes Highlighted) – standard SETU template
    - Supporting Documents for Proposed Modifications (where appropriate)
    - Current Programme Board Membership and Qualifications

Appendix 3 – Minor Changes Proposal: Outline Headings

Note 1: Where embedded awards are affected by any proposed minor change, relevant information for any associated change for these awards must also be clearly specified in the narrative provided. This will depend on the nature of the proposed change.

Section 1 – Basic Information

Programme Title

Stage(s) and Semester(s) Affected

Department

Faculty

Faculty Contact for Minor Change Proposal

Section 2 - Programme Schedule – Current and Proposed Revised Separately (Changes Highlighted)

Standard SETU templates completed

Section 3 – Proposed Minor Change

Narrative section, completed by Programme Board in sufficient detail to allow for an appropriate review, which should typically address:

- Proposed Change (Brief Description)
- Rationale for Minor Change (including how this meets the definition of a Minor Change)
- Implication of Minor Change
- Effective Date for Minor Change
- Transition Plan for Minor Change
- Other Programmes Affected (if applicable, with confirmation from same)
- Stakeholder Engagement on Minor Change (e.g., affected students, other affected Programme Boards/Faculties etc.)
- Commentary on Any Consequent Changes Required to Resources (with confirmation of Faculty Management Team approval)
- Appendices
    - Module Descriptors (Current and Proposed Revised Separately with changes highlighted, only where affected) – standard SETU template
    - Supporting Documents for Minor Change Proposed (where appropriate)