Curriculum Update: Consultation and Justifications

This guidance is aimed at both academic and professional services staff that are involved with the review and submission of updated courses and modules. All courses and modules are updated annually as part of the ongoing cycle of monitoring and review.

This guidance is part of a series of themes:

- **Theme 1: Changes to existing provision (overview)**
- **Theme 2: Consultation and justifications**
- **Theme 3: Teaching, learning and assessment**
- **Theme 4: Late changes**

This guidance includes:

Consultation overview

Student consultation

External consultation

Justifications

Further advice and guidance

- The **External Engagement Framework** enables Departments to consider which level of external consultation changes to courses and modules require.
- The Framework on **student consultation and notification** on course and module changes enables Departments to consider the types of change that require student consultation and notification.
- Office for Students conditions of registration, including keeping courses up-to-date and ensuring coherence.
- Office for Students, protecting students as consumers.
- The Organisational Development team produce a range of resources which help staff who are designing courses and modules.
- Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) UK Quality Code for Higher Education
- Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Guide to providing information to prospective undergraduate students (2017)

Support

- The Course Records Team run a Virtual Office during the Curriculum Update period.
- If you have any queries about any of the information in this document or would like to discuss possible changes before submitting them, then please contact the relevant Faculty QUAD Manager:

Faculty of Arts and Humanities:	Faculty of Science and Health:	Faculty of Social Sciences:
Kayt Newman	Karen Leeder	Hannah Nieuwenhuis

Consultation overview

Input from others can help to decide what changes to make and see what information is needed to support the request. Not all the areas below will be needed in every case, and there may be others in some cases.

Within the department and faculty

- There should be discussions within departments over changes to share ideas, to consider courses as a whole, and to consider whether there's consistency where needed (for example over word counts, marking criteria, or volume and type of assessment).

- You may need to hold discussions at faculty-level, for example where there are resource implications (including staffing).

Students

- Have you consulted with students in accordance with the University's Framework on **student consultation and notification**?

- Student Voice Groups (SVGs) provide an opportunity to consult with students and receive feedback on new proposals. Changes to courses and modules can be discussed at SVGs, and/or other meetings within the department that offer the chance to discuss developments with students.

- The Students' Union may also be able to help with consultation and with working with student reps.

- The National Student Survey (NSS) helps to understand course level feedback, but the results are not released to departments until July/August (past the deadline for making changes). In-year module feedback, SVGs and focus groups can ensure that departments are aware of student feedback before they receive their NSS results.

External academic

- External Examiners should be aware of changes and consulted as part of their role in contributing towards modules and courses as a whole (they are asked to comment on this in their annual report).

- **For major or extensive changes to courses, a mixture of consultation with existing External Examiners and independent external academics may be required, as outlined in the External Engagement Framework (see below)**

Industry experts / employer contacts

- External industry experts or contacts from professional bodies should be consulted for major and extensive changes, as outlined in the External Engagement Framework.

Professional, statutory, or regulatory bodies

- Check what approval and information is needed by organisations that recognise or accredit modules or courses in any way.

- Some organisations do not automatically accredit all versions of a course, so check that all titles are included and take care when introducing new versions of existing courses (for example placement year versions) or changing course titles.

Other institutions

- This could be a review of webpages to see what's on offer or it could be knowledge gained through your contacts (e.g. where academic members of the department are External Examiners)

Other departments and partner institutions

- Please discuss changes with departments which contribute to your courses or where your department contributes towards theirs (for example joint courses and for individual modules).

- Where there are links to ISC, UEIC, Essex Pathways or a partner institution, care should be taken to liaise with the relevant departments and teams in advance of making changes.

Professional Services teams

- Please contact Professional Services teams for advice and particularly where they provide support for departments and students who could be affected.

Student consultation

Student consultation is an important feature of course design and development and ensures that the University meets the regulations of the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA), and encourages students to be active participants in their education in line with the [Education Strategy](#).

How does student consultation benefit the Curriculum Update process?

- At Essex, we encourage students to be active participants in their education and value their feedback on their experience.
- We learn from student feedback and combine this with our academic and pedagogic knowledge of subject matter to ensure that our courses and modules are up to date with developments in the field.
- Student consultation forms a vital part of this process to ensure we listen and respond to students and to help their understanding of their curriculum and how their skills are being developed.

Where a proposed change to a course or module would affect the material information that has been published to current students, consultation forms an important part of the curriculum update process in order to meet CMA regulations.

In these cases, ensuring effective consultation with students before changes are submitted via Curriculum Update allows students to have an opportunity to comment on proposed changes. Providing details of student consultation as part of justifications for change ensures that the University can evidence student consultation ahead of changes being submitted.

Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) Guidance

In March 2015, the CMA provided guidance to Higher Education Institutions that sets out how consumer protection law applies to the relationship between providers and prospective and current students. Not meeting these obligations would put the University at risk of breaching these regulations and students may have a right to pursue legal action against the University. CMA guidance is applied to all levels of provision, and covers three main areas:

CMA Guidance Area	What is this?	What does this mean in relation to changes?
Provision of material information	In order for prospective and current students to make informed decisions about what and where to study, the material information provided to them should be up front, clear, accurate, comprehensive and timely.	This applies to all types of information given to current and prospective students, both written and orally, throughout the admissions process and throughout their studies. If there are changes to this material information, applicants and students should be consulted and notified. Through the Curriculum Update process we check all published course and module information and ensure that we identify and communicate changes to prospective and current students, where needed.
Terms and conditions	The Terms and Conditions that apply to students should be fair and balanced and ensure that students are protected from any surprising changes to course content or costs.	Our commitments in relation to this are set out in our [Student Protection Plan, Consumer Protection Compliance Statement, and the Student Contract](#), and these confirm that the University will take all reasonable steps to minimise disruption, inform students in advance of changes and give students the opportunity to comment where changes are made to their course.

Complaint handling processes and practices	Complaint handling processes and practices should be accessible, clear and fair.	The University aims to resolve any complaint quickly and informally in accordance with the [student concerns and complaints procedure](#).
		Effective consultation around changes and clear notification when changes are made helps to ensure that any concerns are discussed and resolved ahead of any complaint needing to be submitted.

What is considered core material information?

The University's Framework on **student consultation and notification** provides details of what information is considered as core.

How do we notify students of the material information in relation to their course?

- The core information about a course is communicated to applicants ahead of acceptance to their course of study, enabling them to make an informed decision about their course of study.
- Each year, after the Curriculum Update cycle, all current students receive a 'point in time' communication that sets out their course structure and programme specification. If changes are made after the point in time information is sent, a curriculum notification is sent to students via email to notify of them of the change.
- While this ensures that students receive notification of material information each year, it does not ensure consultation has taken place and students could therefore find notification of changes surprising.

Does this mean that Departments aren't able make changes to courses and modules?

- We should limit the amount of change to material information that has been published to students and applicants, but this does not mean that changes cannot be made to courses and modules in order to ensure they are kept current and up to date, and where there is a strong rationale to introduce a change.
- We need to ensure that the current student body has been consulted so that we can be sure, and be able to evidence, that students have been given the opportunity to comment on changes and the rationale behind amendments has been clearly communicated to them.

How should Departments consult with students about potential changes to material information?

The University's Framework on **student consultation and notification** provides details of how departments should consult with students about potential changes to material information.

What if students are not supportive of a proposed change that directly affects them?

If concerns are raised by students about proposed changes we encourage departments to meet with students and have a full discussion of the issues raised to identify how this could be resolved. It's important to consider in advance what to do if students affected by the changes are unhappy with them. We are open to action from the CMA if it is deemed that we have been unfair to students, so we need to ensure, wherever possible, students' concerns are fully addressed in order to secure consent and to maintain strong student satisfaction outcomes.

If after meeting with students there is still significant concern about an amendment, you should not proceed with the change as planned and instead discuss possible alternatives. If there is a strong rationale for the change and you'd like to discuss how this could be implemented, you can seek further advice from QUAD prior to submission of the change.

External consultation

What do we mean by external consultation?

External consultation can take many forms:

- External examiners
- External academic experts
- Professional, statutory and regulatory bodies
- Industry experts
- Employers
- Partner institutions

How does external consultation benefit the Curriculum Update process?

- External experts provide independent, impartial input and advice and ensure courses meet the academic standards and quality expected across the sector.
- Input from industry contacts and professional bodies also helps to design courses which are responsive to the needs of industry, enterprise and employers.
- The University's Education Strategy includes an objective to provide a range of opportunities for students to apply their learning, including the integration of experiential, work-related and entrepreneurial learning in the curriculum.

What level of consultation is needed regarding making changes to courses and modules?

- The External Engagement Framework provides details on the type and level of external consultation needed for each type of change.
- The framework has been based on the University's approach to new course approvals, where the approval route and external consultation are risk-based according to the quantity of new provision.

Timeline

- An indication is given in the External Engagement Framework which meets the timelines for the Curriculum Update process. Departments can, however, determine how they wish to implement the framework and how to collect and record the supporting evidence.
- Earlier discussions are likely to be needed where significant changes are planned, particularly where they would lead to approval via an approval event and panel.
- Please note, requests for course/module changes past the published Curriculum Update deadline should still be submitted with evidence of external engagement.

Departments should ensure:

Consultation/liaison with external experts takes place depending on the type of change and provide information about any requests for changes via the Curriculum Update

That External Examiners have the information they need in order to be able to comment on any changes to academic provision as part of their annual report

That External Examiners are only asked to comment on the areas that fall within their role. These are set out in the External Examiner role and annual report template.

That External Examiners are contacted separately on assessment policy/process, for example, they would be consulted in advance on exam questions.

Justifications

Why are justifications needed?

- The Office for Students, Quality Assurance Agency and CMA requirements all highlight the importance of consulting and communicating with students.
- This includes clearly setting out any changes in advance, explaining the reasons for making changes, what the likely impact will be, and what students' options are.

What happens with the justifications?

The new Curriculum Update system enables notifications to be sent to students and applicants at the point in time where changes are finalised, so that students receive accurate information about their course and modules for next year.

The curriculum notifications that are sent include the justifications that have been entered by departments. It's therefore really important that these justifications clearly communicate the nature of the change and the reason for the change.

Do justifications need to be submitted for every change?

No, this is not the case. The Course Records Team has produced separate guidance on what changes require department comments and justifications. Some examples of where department justifications are needed include:

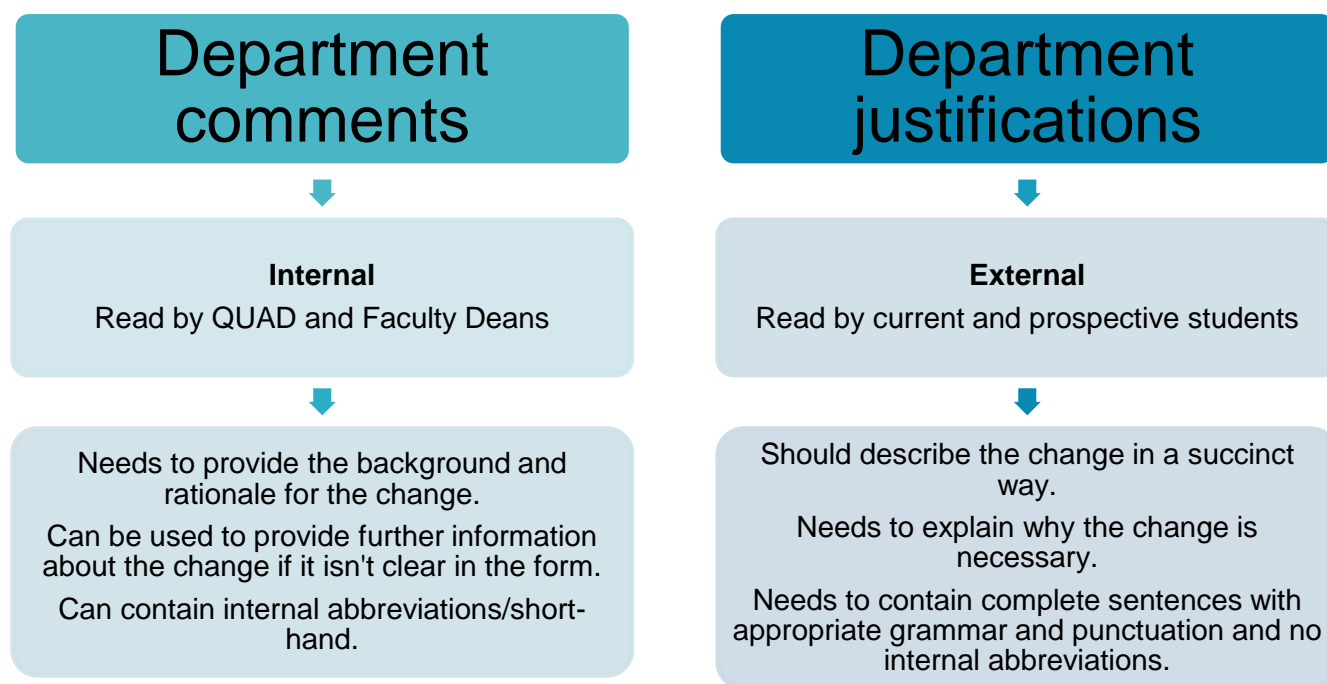| Course titles	Changes to course aims and outcomes	Course structure (core/compulsory changes)

Module titles	Change to credit value

When changes are being submitted in Curriculum Update, the Curriculum Update user should refer to the guidance produced by the Course Records Team to identify if a justification is needed.

Isn't a department comment enough?

It's important to distinguish here between department **comments** and **justifications.**

Department comments	Department justifications
Internal Read by QUAD and Faculty Deans	**External** Read by current and prospective students
Needs to provide the background and rationale for the change. Can be used to provide further information about the change if it isn't clear in the form. Can contain internal abbreviations/short-hand.	Should describe the change in a succinct way. Needs to explain why the change is necessary. Needs to contain complete sentences with appropriate grammar and punctuation and no internal abbreviations.

For certain types of changes department comments **and** department justifications will be required.

Are the justifications checked?

Whilst QUAD will undertake a sense-check of the justifications provided, we will not edit the justifications; **the information submitted by the Department is the information sent to the students.**

Examples of Published Justification good practice include:

- 'The change in title will better reflect course content and has been made as part of a faculty review of module titles.'
- 'The Postgraduate Directors and module teaching team have identified a need for students to develop and consolidate a number of research skills, and this development and consolidation will be best achieved by weekly small group teaching sessions. It is anticipated that weekly (rather than fortnightly) sessions will lead to greater momentum in student learning.'
- 'The changes to the course structure better reflect the focus of the curriculum and provide students with a wider range of optional modules.'
- 'The change in modules being offered by the Department of Government is to ensure student experience across all courses in the Department is improved by offering more optionality in this joint degree.'
- 'Adding a new zero credit student development module will better support students to develop essential employability skills and build a sense of community for students.'

What if a justification is not submitted and it is needed?

The Curriculum Update request will be returned to the Department with a note in the request form to populate the justification field.

Snapshot

What actions do Departments need to take?

- Departments need to ensure that **appropriate consultation** is taken with all relevant stakeholders as part of considering changes to provision.
- For certain types of changes, departments need to provide **justifications that can be sent to prospective and current students** to explain the change and the reasons why the change has been made.

Why are these actions important?

- The Office for Students, Quality Assurance Agency and CMA requirements **all highlight the importance of consulting and communicating with students**. This includes clearly setting out any changes in advance, explaining the reasons for making changes, what the likely impact will be, and what students' options are.
- External experts provide independent, impartial input and advice and ensure courses meet the **academic standards and quality expected across the sector**.
- Listening to students and responding to their feedback will help **improve student experience and satisfaction.**

Who's involved?

- **Staff:** Both academic and professional services staff will need to be involved in consulting with all relevant stakeholders regarding the proposed changes.
- **Students:** Students should be consulted as detailed above.
- **External input:** External Examiners, professional bodies, industry contacts and others can provide input on the proposed changes and any restrictions.
- **Deans and QUAD:** Review and approve changes, and update course records

How should consultation and justifications be submitted?

- Details of consultations and any required justifications should be entered into the relevant fields on **Curriculum Update.**

What are the deadlines?

- All changes to existing provision must be submitted by **1 March.** This includes providing details of any consultation undertaken and also submitting the justifications that will be sent to current and prospective students.

Document review information

Document owner	Quality and Academic Development Team
Document last reviewed by	Aminah Suhail, Quality and Academic Development Manager
Date last reviewed	August 2024
Review frequency	Annually