



Mary Immaculate College
Response to Draft White Paper Statutory Guidelines for the
Quality Assurance (QA) of Research Degree Programmes
Submitted to QQI October 2016

Mary Immaculate College welcomes the publication of this set of Draft Guidelines for Quality Assurance, and we appreciate the opportunity afforded by QQI to provide feedback. We note that the draft guidelines represent and articulate best practice, and their orientation and content are reflective of our experiences. We note (from p6) that Mary Immaculate College must have regard to the pending guidelines, and we are in favour and supportive of such an arrangement.

We welcome in particular the following, and recommend that these be specifically incorporated into the final guidelines:

- The strongly student-centred and student-orientated nature and content of the provisions, in principle, as well as in operational terms
- The recognition (p5) that the guidelines do not encroach on the internal QA systems operated by HEIs, but in practice, complement and add value to them
- The emphasis on the role of academic staff, and the acknowledgement of the need for sufficient resources to ensure and sustain the proper supportive environment for student researchers
- The acknowledgement of the linkages between research and the personal, vocational and personal development of the student
- The inclusion of provisions for joint research supervision and co-supervision
- The recognition of the need for on-going training, in addition to monitoring and quality control
- The incorporation of feedback processes and mechanisms in research (Section 1.3).

We note the following, and invite QQI to draw on good practice here, based on our current systems and practices:

- Section 1.1 Governance: MIC already implements all of the procedures specified here, and indeed, we exceed them in that we have broadly-based structures for decision-making at all stages in the research degree trajectory
- Section Two Partnerships: MIC has considerable experience in respect of the joint-management of research degrees, including with universities in Germany and The Netherlands, and we are supportive of the provisions as set out in the draft guidelines, including the need for formal agreements and MoUs
- Section 3.3 Transfers: MIC operates a formal system for student transfers (Student Progression Upgrades) and we support the inclusion of this in the guidelines
- Section 4.1 Supervision: Our experience is that the Research and Graduate School plays an important role, particularly in QA and the oversight of regulations and procedures. This supports the role played by academic departments. In this context, we also note and welcome the draft guidelines' (p24) specific references to supervisory teams
- Section 6.3 Mobility: Mary Immaculate College supports researchers' mobility. However, our ability to invest in enabling mobility can be externally constrained, and this risk needs to be acknowledged and any barriers mitigated
- Section 8.2 Theses format: MIC requires electronic copies (in addition to hard copy) from all levels – including undergraduate, and this works well

- Section 9.3 Assessment Boards: MIC requires boards to have an independent chairperson, and we recommend the mainstreaming of this practice. Internal examiners also play a prominent role in the process in MIC, and are responsible for communicating boards' findings to the student, and for overseeing compliance with boards' requirements / recommendations
- Sections 15.8 (doctoral programmes in a particular discipline-area) and 15.9 (doctoral programmes in unspecified discipline-areas) combined show a useful conceptual splitting of two trajectories in contemporary doctoral programmes. The first, "the inherited trajectory", is premised on the "wisdom of practice" that has been passed down from generation to generation of scholars in a particular discipline-area. The second, what might be described as "the emergent trajectory", is premised on anticipatory, robust and structured doctoral programmes. In complement and counterpoint to the inherited trajectory, these doctoral programmes are designed to be responsive, relevant and current for new kinds of knowledge, skills, and practice across social, cultural and educational contexts. The second trajectory is invariably interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary and often interdepartmental and interinstitutional, and represents a significant paradigmatic shift in doctoral programmes. As a long time provider of doctoral programmes in a range of discipline-areas and unspecified discipline areas, most recently in terms of structured, themed and generic doctoral programmes, MIC recognises the "vital simultaneities" that lie between the inherited and emergent trajectories and welcomes the opportunity for conversation-building in relation to the development of "explicit criteria" against frameworks, principles and practices in doctoral programmes and, most acutely, in relation to profiling research active faculty, international peer programme reviews, and the importance of sustained strategic doctoral programmes as opposed to particular individual doctoral programmes.

In order to complement and strengthen the draft guidelines, our experience to date leads us to put forward the following recommendations:

- Page Five: In identifying the stakeholders with whom researchers engage, we recommend the addition of 'civil society' to the list
- Page Seven (end of paragraph at top of page): Include 'dissemination and publication' among the elements of research
- Page Ten: While fully supportive of the need to ensure and sustain financial and other supports throughout a research degree programme, it must be acknowledged that HEIs are reliant on external bodies to ensure this happens in full
- Page Thirteen: Add 'interim steps' (e.g. Progression Panels) to the list of material that should be contained in information communications
- Page Thirteen: Include the timely and pre-payment of fees among the list of responsibilities
- Page Sixteen (Section 3.4): The mechanisms available to research students in respect of complaints and securing advice can be as important to staff as to students, and staff needs ought to be provided for in this respect. Such provision may be incorporated into Section 4.2.
- Page Nineteen: Timeframe/ deadlines ought to be included among the list of provisions presented here