



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

WHITE PAPER

Topic-Specific Quality Assurance (QA) Guidelines

FOR CONSULTATION

STATUTORY GUIDELINES FOR THE QA OF RESEARCH DEGREE PROGRAMMES

This White Paper contains proposed policy for topic-specific quality assurance guidelines for research degree programmes.

QQI is seeking feedback from stakeholders on the proposed policy contained in this White Paper. Different formats will be used to seek consultation in addition to emailed submissions.

Submissions may be emailed to
consultation@QQI.ie

The closing date for submissions is **Thursday 3 November 2016**.

In your submission please clearly indicate:

1. *Your contact details.*
2. *Whether you are responding as an individual or on behalf of an organisation.*
3. *If you do not wish your submission to be published.*

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1 INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT

This document outlines the statutory quality assurance (QA) guidelines established by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) for all providers of research degrees and related services. These Guidelines are “statutory” guidelines: QQI must publish QA guidelines under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012 (referred to as the 2012 Act in the rest of the document). The 2012 Act further requires providers to “have regard to” QQI’s quality assurance (QA) guidelines when establishing their own quality assurance procedures.

These Guidelines supplement the QQI *Core Statutory QA Guidelines*. While the *Core Guidelines* provide the quality assurance guidance required, the Guidelines in this document address the specific responsibilities of providers regarding the quality assurance of research degree programmes. These responsibilities are set out in general terms in the 2012 Act. Providers of research degree programmes should also refer to QQI’s other sector-specific and topic-specific quality assurance guidelines as appropriate.

These Guidelines should be read in conjunction with QQI’s policy on Core Statutory QA Guidelines.

These topic-specific QA guidelines supplement and are in addition to the core QA guidelines.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THESE GUIDELINES?

These Guidelines are to be used:

- » By providers when designing, reviewing, renewing and enhancing institutional quality assurance policies and procedures for research degree programmes.
- » As a basis for the approval by QQI of provider’s relevant quality assurance procedures (other than for previously established universities).

These Guidelines are not intended:

To prescribe how providers are to operate research degree programmes. Rather, the internal systems of quality assurance for research degree programmes and related services are appropriate to their individual contexts and include mechanisms that are effective in monitoring the effectiveness of those systems.

These guidelines are devised to:

Promote and enhance an active and supportive academic research environment and community in all providers offering research degrees. This environment will promote transparent and accountable procedures for all topics and services associated with research degrees. It will encourage and facilitate active participation of people who can provide academic guidance, authority and leadership in the research concerned. Research activity will be well connected with the broader research community in the discipline area with the support of and effective management of a research strategy. Such an environment will have sufficient staff which is capable of, and has experience in, supervising research students in the discipline-area at the appropriate National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ¹) level. The volume of research activity will be sufficient to create a stimulating environment for research students and evidence of co-operative behaviour and collegiality. There will be opportunities for research students to interact with other researchers both within and outside the institution and opportunities, where appropriate, for collaboration with other providers, industry and commerce and the public sector.

TO WHOM DO THESE GUIDELINES APPLY?

These Guidelines are applicable to all types of providers providing research degrees at levels 9 and 10 on the NFQ. They are produced for the attention of, and use by, providers establishing quality assurance procedures under the 2012 Act. The legal context varies between providers as follows:

- » Previously established universities and the National University of Ireland (NUI) are recognised as autonomous and must have regard to QA guidelines in the development of their internal QA procedures.

¹ [National Framework of Qualifications \(NFQ\)](#)

- » Other awarding bodies, namely the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI), the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and institutes of technology, must have regard to the QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by QQI.
- » Independent or private providers providing research degrees that come voluntarily to QQI to seek approval of their QA procedures and access to QQI research awards. Such providers must have regard to the QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by QQI.
- » Linked providers must have regard to the QA guidelines prior to the approval of their QA procedures by a designated awarding body.

Providers concerned with the administration and delivery of other research-intensive degree programmes are advised to consider these Guidelines and apply them insofar as relevant.

The Guidelines address the responsibilities of providers as bodies:

- » where students are registered to undertake research degree programmes,
- » where members of staff are supported in their commitment to research as a core aspect of their duties, and
- » in which research/development/scholarship of a standard acceptable for refereed publications is carried out.

SCOPE AND RELEVANCE

These Guidelines are focused on research degree programmes, Masters and Doctoral degree programmes and related services. Where the terms ‘Masters’ and ‘Doctoral’ are used, they indicate primarily these programmes and the associated awards. Therefore, the guidelines refer directly to the quality assurance of research Masters or PhDs and other doctoral degrees, including professional doctorates, recognised on the NFQ and related services.

In the context of these guidelines, ‘research’ covers a wide variety of activities but always represents a careful study or investigation based on a systematic understanding and critical awareness of knowledge. It covers innovative work in the whole range of academic, scientific, technological and professional

fields, including the humanities and creative arts. In all of these contexts, ‘research’ is understood to involve the integration of rigour, reflection and critique.

Higher education providers have embraced an increasing diversity of academic and professional routes to doctoral attainment including collaborative and inter-sectoral approaches, as well as provision for student mobility. The guidelines have been informed by these developments in addition to the principles adopted in the National Framework for Doctoral Education².

The use of common standards, principles and expectations for research, as set out in the National Framework for Doctoral Education, in addition to a common set of QA guidelines emphasises that the quality expectations for research degree programmes are the same for all providers.

Research degree programmes represent a significant time and cost commitment by students addressing important issues and problems, which can be life changing. The intensity of this experience for research students and the need for individual expert supervision are among the factors that make the effective quality assurance of research degree programmes particularly important.

² [National Framework for Doctoral Education](#)

2 THE GUIDELINES

1 GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT OF QUALITY

1.1 Governance

In the context of these Guidelines, ‘governance’ refers to procedures in place to oversee all aspects of the provision of research degree programmes. Procedures in place for governance in the context of research degrees:

- » are clearly described by means that are publicly and easily accessible
- » involve representatives of those most closely involved, including research supervisors and research students
- » ensure that important decisions on student admission, progress and assessment are subject to the approval of at least two competent persons
- » involve a formal approval process for all initial research proposals by the Academic Council/ Committee; Doctoral School or Faculty Research Committee or other formal body
- » take cognisance of the evolving requirements on ethics, research integrity, commercial and legal sensitivities and matters that impact on research projects following their conclusion (intellectual property)
- » take cognisance of external stakeholders and the impact of funding organisations

This system of governance, which may involve a specified senior officer (such as a dean of graduate studies) and one or more administrative structures (e.g. postgraduate school or a research graduate studies office), oversees the development, revision, implementation and quality assurance of defined processes for research degree programmes and related services. Some examples include:

- » providing information in publicly accessible formats, online and in print, to prospective and current students, supervisors and relevant others
- » the admission and formal induction of research students

- » supports for supervisors and research students
- » models for joint research supervision, new and existing supervisory models
- » training in all relevant areas: standards of writing and referencing, ethics, research integrity, and generic and transferable skills
- » the monitoring of students' progress and decisions on advancement (or otherwise)
- » systemic or periodic analysis of effectiveness of procedures
- » the final assessment of students

QA procedures on governance incorporate circumstances where providers choose to act in cooperation with one or more competent providers of research, to ensure adequate governance, comprehensive up-to-date policies and procedures, objective and informed decision-making, and necessary services and supports for administrators, supervisors and research students. The guidelines on governance set out in the Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines, also apply to the governance of research degrees and related services including:

- a) A system of governance where objectives are aligned with mission and strategy
- b) The quality assurance system is owned by the provider on a cross organisational basis with discipline specific requirements considered
- c) A system of governance that protects the integrity of academic processes and standards
- d) A system of governance that considers risk
- e) A system of governance that considers the results of internal and external evaluation

(Section 1.1 Core Statutory QA Guidelines)

1.2 Resources and provisions

The Core Statutory QA guidelines refer to resource management. The provider has primary responsibility to ensure that all researchers or research groups with (or planning to have) research students have:

- » access to human, physical and financial resources to sustainably support research degree projects
- » access to training/ information on intellectual property, integrity, ethics and other legal and commercial matters evolving as a consequence of increased professionalism and joint projects
- » demonstrated ability to make original contributions to the relevant area and have their findings published by recognised refereed publications in that area
- » research records that are in accord with high ethical and professional standards

The internal quality assurance procedures for research provision reflect these responsibilities.

1.3 Quality assurance, enhancement and improvement

The quality assurance system for research degree programmes in the provider is coherent, integrated into the wider internal QA system, and is an integral part of its research culture, and has the following characteristics:

The quality assurance procedures for research degree programmes ensure that the elements of the mission and objectives of the provider related to research degree programmes are achieved. It is focused on the protection of academic and research integrity, acceptable academic standards and effective processes. They consider risks that arise in the context of research provision, including fraud, malpractice and plagiarism, as well as factors related to student and staff wellbeing.

The procedures also ensure that research students have opportunities to give feedback on their experience and that regular, systemic evaluations of research programmes are carried out. For quality improvement, enhancement and evaluation purposes, due consideration is given to all feedback and self-monitoring processes, relevant data and statistics, and the findings of internally and externally initiated evaluations.

- ~ quality assurance procedures are fit-for-purpose, simple and logical, and described in clear terms
- ~ the roles and responsibilities of all concerned are clearly defined

- ~ data are collected and indicators are monitored to confirm effectiveness and trends
- ~ findings from data analyses, as well as from relevant quality evaluations, are assessed in the light of past experience by institutional management, as well as by those more closely involved
- ~ feedback from students, industry collaborators, employers, funding agencies, project sponsors, internal and external examiners, and other core partners and collaborators is taken on board

Procedures ensure that both local and strategic responses to quality assurance outputs from research degrees can occur in parallel:

- » individual roles and responsibilities and implementation processes are clear
- » decisions on appropriate responses and actions are timely and are followed up
- » quality improvement is recognised by the higher education institution (HEI) as a priority due to the nature of research provision
- » risk assessment associated with the context for research studies and risk mitigation are always considered

1.4 Publishing quality assurance procedures

In addition to the documented approach to quality assurance procedures as set out in the Core Statutory QA Guidelines, the provider has an institution-wide procedure for research degrees that ensures the easy availability, regular updating and review of information on all aspects of research degree programmes and related services. In the context of research degrees, statements of policies and procedures related to quality assurance are integral to published descriptions of research programmes. Detail on specific issues is readily accessible online or in integrated documentation on research degree programmes reflecting a comprehensive record of all QA procedures for research degrees.

Procedures are in place to ensure that all those concerned with research degree programmes are fully aware of the relevant quality assurance procedures.

2 MANAGING PARTNERSHIPS IN RESEARCH DEGREE PROGRAMMES

The Core Statutory QA Guidelines refers to Other Parties Involved in Education and Training. This is in the context of other awards; accreditations; collaborations; external partnerships; second providers; expert panellists and external examiners; all of which are both national and international. Procedures for research degree collaborations and partnerships fall within these arrangements. In the context of research some of these involve low volume and long term ‘understandings’. In all arrangements:

- » There are clear written agreements with all individual organisations, businesses and companies that are partners in research projects involving students at home and abroad.
- » These agreements make clear that the standards, quality assurance procedures, training requirements and norms for research degree programmes are applicable, and include formal assurances on students’ welfare and wellbeing.
- » As appropriate to research provision, the provider’s procedures for entering into such partnerships include standard and explicit due diligence activities as indicated in Section 10.2 of the *Core Statutory QA Guidelines*.
- » There are clear procedures and information for students in place where providers are making joint or other dual research awards. Such procedures are in place prior to the commencement of the research degree and communicated in advance to the students as appropriate.

Where research students pursue their projects on the campus or premises of partner organisations, the provider:

- » makes available appropriate supports and continuous professional development opportunities to co-supervisors (see 4.1 below) employed by the external partner
- » facilitates the acquisition by externally located students of experience as tutors and/or demonstrators and their participation in the broader intellectual environment of the provider
- » works closely with the partners to ensure adequate access by externally located students to an adequate range of training opportunities (see Section 6 below)

The provider makes arrangements with partners for regular formal meetings between appropriate staff of the provider and representatives of partners to discuss, in general terms, trends in student

progress and welfare, and possibilities for more effective cooperation and continuous improvement and enhancement.

Where significant partnerships involving research students are not part of a multi-institutional project funded by a national or international body and subject to rules and conditions laid down by that body, the HEI has specific memoranda of understanding with the partners.

3 RESEARCH STUDENTS

3.1 Recruitment and registration

To help assure good choices by applicants to research degree programmes, information is made available by means of electronic and print channels, careers and other services, including information on what undertaking a research degree programme involves. This information emphasises four fundamentally important aspects of each programme:

- » eligibility requirements for registration and duration for each programme
- » what research students can expect from the programme
- » what research students must do in order to achieve the qualification
- » what options are open to graduates in terms of opportunities for further studies and career paths

Other examples of information include:

- » the areas of active research offered
- » fees and sources of funding
- » application procedures
- » how student-supervisor-project combinations may be formed or developed
- » responsibilities, duties, normal and permissible working hours and safety practices
- » persons and/or bodies responsible, and processes for monitoring student progress, with possible outcomes

- » information to help students make informed choices when considering research supervisors and projects
- » the research and publication records of all relevant academic staff is easily accessible
- » opportunities for potential students to visit the relevant section or laboratories and meet students already in place, in advance of a decision to register

Procedures are in place to support students in their decisions on the initial registration on research degree programmes, including clear admission criteria for each relevant research programme that are compatible with the NFQ.

Procedures for the registration of research students:

- » ensure that decisions to admit and register are fair and objective
- » record how the prior qualifications (and the linguistic competence, if appropriate) of international applicants are assessed in deciding eligibility for registration
- » validate the prior qualifications and objectively assesses the eligibility of applicants
- » recognise prior learning (RPL) (in accord with national standards for admission to graduate programmes, if and when they are agreed), and record the bases for decisions on registrations that involve RPL
- » maintain records of decisions to admit and register research students, including the names of the staff making each decision, one of whom is normally the person who will act as principal research supervisor of the registered student

3.2 Responsibilities of research students

Procedures are in place to make research students aware of their responsibilities, for example, with respect to commitment; attendance, training and work expectations reflecting the intensity of research; the progress of their own research projects; and attaining the standards necessary to graduate. The procedures outline a role for all levels within the institution and also ensure that officers, research supervisors and other stakeholders support and facilitate an understanding of student responsibilities.

3.3 Progression and transfer

There are procedures and criteria related to student progression through research degree programmes and transfers between them. Procedures are in place to:

- » record all such decisions and retain relevant documents
- » ensure that all relevant students have adequate opportunities to become aware of:
 - ~ the criteria necessary for continuation and final examination as Masters candidates
 - ~ the criteria necessary for students registered for Masters degrees to transfer to a Doctoral programme (i.e. where student qualifications, projects and funding are potentially suitable and appropriate to a Doctoral programme)
 - ~ the criteria necessary for continuation and final examination as a Doctoral candidate and of possible outcomes should they fail to meet these criteria

Procedures for the transfer of a research student from the Master's degree to the Doctoral programme involves a formal transfer process with defined criteria. The transfer process incorporates the external review of the proposed research by an independent expert in the project or discipline-area concerned.

Procedures for the transfer of a research student from the Doctoral programme to a Master's degree, where students might be able to transfer, will involve a formal transfer process with defined criteria and the external review of the proposed research by an independent expert assessor. This includes students who might be able to transfer from a professional doctorate programme to a Master's degree. Such procedures will reassess the students' capacity for success by a process involving an independent expert.

Procedures in place to address the consequences for breaches of regulations with regard to a range of issues (including research integrity) also indicate the associated implications for progression.

3.4 Advice, complaints and issues

Procedures are in place to ensure that research students can avail of confidential independent and objective advice, air concerns, make complaints and raise relevant issues related to their research programme or related services. The intense nature of the research student experience and the primary role of supervision in this regard may require additional procedures for research students to those indicated in the Core Statutory QA Guidelines. Such procedures:

- » involve trained and suitably experienced staff
- » anticipate a wide range of possibilities for access to such supports
- » prioritise informal resolution of issues
- » are independent of the internal staff associated with the research programme

A complaints procedure is in place which reflects the particular context of research provision and the intense nature of the research degree with matters such as allegations of academic dishonesty, discrimination and harassment.

Procedures are in place to ensure that relevant information related to student complaints is logged and reported to specified senior officers for quality improvement purposes and trends are addressed when they become apparent. Such procedures preserve student anonymity and confidentiality.

Procedures are in place to implement follow-up actions required where complaints are upheld regarding breaches of research integrity and other significant breaches of provider policy. Such procedures should include matters regarding the certification³ of qualifications and clarify:

- » the procedures and criteria for the withdrawal of an award
- » the standing of the award documentation and other matters relating to research outputs

³ QA Guidelines for Certification are set out in the Sector Specific QA Guidelines for Designated Awarding Bodies (section 6.1) and Sector Specific QA Guidelines for Institutes of Technology (section 6.1).

4 SUPERVISORS AND PROJECTS

4.1 Supervision

Procedures in place for the supervision of research degree students recognise that:

- » The supervision of each research student is the collective responsibility of the supervisor(s), the department/school/other appropriate research unit and the institution.
- » Supervisors are essential partners in research students' education and development, advising during the long process of mastering concepts, specialised topics and methodologies, and conducting research.
- » Students are entitled to effective supervision of their research, including an appropriate level of engagement with adequate meetings and discussions, agreed work plans and objectives, opportunities to present work-in-progress and mentoring.

Procedures on supervision will ensure that:

- I. Every research student has a principal supervisor who is normally a member of staff of the provider. The principal supervisor takes full responsibility for the overall supervision and management of the student and an appropriate level of responsibility for supervision of the student's research project.
- II. Every research student also has an advisor and/or (a) co-supervisor(s) who contribute(s) to their supervision on an ongoing basis over the duration of their studies. Advisors to research students are expert in a similar or cognate area of research, are in regular contact and provide mentoring and support as required.
- III. Co-supervision involves collaboration, it reflects a situation where multiple staff provide expert input to a student's project, whether these staff are wholly internal to the HEI, or with an external partner.
- IV. Co-supervisory arrangements facilitate qualified and promising potential supervisors in gaining experience of supervision.
- V. The definitions, role and composition of a supervisory team are clearly defined (for example, the principal supervisor and co-supervisor(s) (if any) act with others, when appropriate, as a supervisory team).

4.2 Supervisors

Procedures in place for the appointment/establishment of supervisors:

- » recognise that being a supervisor is a professional role that requires both being an active researcher in the relevant area as well as particular skills and capacities regarding supervision
- » include clearly defined criteria on the eligibility of persons to act as principal supervisors, co-supervisors and as advisors
- » include formal responsibilities for principal supervisors (see also Section 9.2) and co-supervisors, as appropriate supervisory teams
- » include the role and responsibilities of advisors as distinct from that of a supervisor/co-supervisor
- » provide opportunities for all principal supervisors, co-supervisors and advisors to become aware of:
 - I. their own responsibilities and rights with respect to the research students they work with
 - II. the responsibilities and entitlements of their students
 - III. the regulations governing the operation of research programmes and examinations
 - IV. regulations governing the normal frequencies of relevant contacts between supervisors and their students
- » Provide qualified research-active staff with supports and training as research degree supervisors and/or as advisors, including:
 - ~ obligatory structured training courses with a range of activities
 - ~ the appointment of a mentor with experience of adequate research supervision
 - ~ the appointment of an experienced 'co-supervisor'
 - ~ continuity of adequate supervision in cases related to supervisors being absent for significant periods and approaching retirement
 - ~ possibility to modify supervisory arrangements following the outcomes of relevant complaints procedures

The procedures in place recognise research supervision and membership of supervisory teams as contributions to staff workloads and have in place agreed, context- and discipline-appropriate, flexible standards and criteria as to the relative weights of principal supervisor, co-supervisor and advisor roles.

Procedures are in place to record all ongoing staff roles as principal supervisors, co-supervisors and advisors. Such procedures maintain active oversight of these roles in the interest of student success and wellbeing, and the recognition of the contributions of supervisors.

4.3 Research projects

Procedures are in place to establish oversight mechanisms that seek to ensure the research projects agreed with students are realistic and appropriate with respect to:

- » the level of the degree programme, whether Masters or Doctoral
- » requirements for consideration of the project having been satisfied, such as:
 - ~ ethical and professional matters have been vetted by a competent committee, including research integrity processes in place for all research proposals
 - ~ matters relating to intellectual property generated by the student's project
 - ~ matters relating to group ownership of a project and co-authorship
 - ~ record-keeping and monitoring in all these relevant areas
- » the experience and competences of the principal (and joint supervisor[s])
- » the qualifications and capabilities of the research student
- » measures intended to enhance students' educational experience and promote successful outcomes
 - ~ English language teaching supports
 - ~ generic skills training
 - ~ collaborative opportunities to engage with peers internally and internationally
- » facilities and resources available within the HEI and, if any, in (the) cooperating external organisation(s)
- » measures planned to deal with any limitations with respect to facilities and resources otherwise available
- » compliance with the ethical and safety requirements of the provider

5 INDUCTION

Procedures for the induction of research students:

- » Facilitate awareness among all new research students of the fundamental aspects of the degree programmes they are entering, and of their own responsibilities and commitments as student researchers.
- » Provide advice to students on the implications of the demanding learning objectives of research degree programmes. The means used to convey this information are substantial and multi-faceted, for example:
 - ~ allow sufficient time for virtual or actual tours of general facilities
 - ~ facilitate virtual or actual meetings with established research students
 - ~ provide a range of opportunities for discussion sessions and for questions
- » Include more focused sessions, as appropriate to specific research areas or disciplines delivered to complement the more general sessions and include, for example, technical matters such as instruction on safety and security issues tailored to the kinds of research projects to be undertaken.
- » Ensure that suitable induction procedures are available at intervals throughout the year as appropriate.
- » Include arrangements for monitoring the quality of induction sessions and follow-up actions required to improve their effectiveness and to achieve high levels of student participation. Such arrangements are established at the level of the provider.

6 TRAINING AND CAREER PREPARATION

6.1 Individual development plans

Individual development plans (e.g. personal development plan) are established for each research student. They are jointly developed and agreed by the research student and his/her supervisor(s) soon after induction. The process for establishing the development plan facilitates full ownership by the

student of the plan. Each plan is revised as necessary during the duration of the programme. There are two distinct components addressed in the development plan:

- » 1. Research, generic and transferable skills training. Constituent courses are assigned ECTS weights, and totals are within limits agreed institutionally or nationally for Masters and Doctoral programmes. Attendance rates for classes are noted. Summative assessments of student learning (if any) are independent of final degree assessments.
- » 2. Courses and activities that may be necessary for the students to undertake in order to advance their individual and specific research project.

Providers may have other institutional related components to be addressed in development plans.

6.2 Skills training

Training in research, generic and transferable skills is provided for research students to equip them for their research projects and for future employment. Courses and activities suit the discipline area(s) of the research project and are available at regular intervals. Generic or transferable skills (including related digital skills) that may need to be acquired, or enhanced include, for example:

- » writing and editing skills
- » referencing standards and acknowledging the work of others
- » speaking in public and making presentations
- » information acquisition and organisation
- » statistics
- » writing and managing projects and grant applications
- » publication

Research students are provided with opportunities to become knowledgeable about areas relevant to their discipline and professional areas, such as:

- » ethics
- » research integrity

- » professionalism
- » intellectual property, technology transfer and commercialisation matters
- » general safety procedures

There are specific sessions and sources of information for research students on plagiarism, citation standards and related areas.

Research procedures are also in place to ensure that supervisors, and the research environments in which they work, are always in accord with high ethical, professional and safety standards.

Procedures are in place to formalise arrangements for:

- » cooperation among institutions/providers to share resources
- » facilitate access to external research students
- » provide the ancillary training requirements of research students suited to their needs

6.3 Research mobility, conferences and networking

The provider and individual research supervisors:

1. Maximise opportunities for research students to experience different research environments, that are beneficial for accessing relevant information or acquiring specific skills.
2. Ensure that research students have opportunities to report on work in progress and to present findings, both internally and externally, for example by means of oral and poster presentations at seminars, workshops and conferences and in journal articles.
3. Facilitate students making contacts and 'networking', as appropriate, with others, nationally and internationally, who are active in similar fields of research.

6.4 Career preparation

The provider, its careers service and individual supervisors seek to make research students aware of further educational opportunities, realistic career options and long-term career development. Options with respect to future careers are always seen as relevant topics for discussion during induction, the planning of each student's individual development plan and, as appropriate, during monitoring and assessment sessions.

7 STUDENT PROGRESS

7.1 Monitoring and assessing student progress

Procedures are in place for systematic monitoring of the progress of research students as they explore the context of their projects, validate and use complex methodologies, and evaluate findings. Monitoring of student progress will consider, for example:

- » the likelihood that research students will complete their programmes successfully while graduating within a reasonable time
- » any current arrangements (e.g. with respect to facilities or supervision) that are unsatisfactory
- » identification and sourcing of necessary extra support for students
- » inappropriate or insufficient students' work practice, style of research or deficiencies in writing which may require a formal warning
- » alternative courses of action which may be necessary for students, for example, to exit the programme, or transfer to another programme

Formal assessment of progress may include:

- » written reports by students and supervisors
- » presentations by students
- » discussions with students, with and without supervisors' present
- » OTHER defined outputs agreed at the outset of the research degree

Effective arrangements for monitoring and shared decision-making can vary between institutions and across discipline areas within institutions - often determined by the scale of research degree provision. Following registration of research students, a basic schedule of formal assessment meetings for the expected duration of the individual student research programme is agreed with each student.

Procedures in place to assess progress:

- » involve supervisory teams
- » ensure objectivity and/or competence, by the involvement of external experts if necessary
- » allow for an extra assessment if requested by supervisors or students

Final decisions related to student progression are made by appropriate bodies in the institution in accord with the regulations of the institution.

7.2 Reviews and appeals

Grievance procedures are in place to allow decisions on progression to be reviewed or appealed. This procedure involves appropriate disinterested expertise, often from outside the provider, and allows for decisions to change arrangements with respect to supervision.

8 THESES

8.1 Preparation

Procedures and guidelines on research thesis preparation, standards and lengths, and the responsibilities of supervisors and students are clear and cover all formats for Masters and Doctoral degrees. Deadlines for Masters and Doctoral thesis submissions that may reasonably lead to graduation by particular dates.

Research students are provided with suitable locations, training and supports to aid efficient thesis writing.

Information on relevant standards and issues particularly those related to plagiarism; the attribution of quotations; regulation on joint ownership; and the acknowledgment of the contributions of others, if any, to the research project are reissued to research students when they give due notice that they are preparing for final assessment.

Research students are provided with an opportunity to vet their draft thesis using the appropriate software to highlight areas of inadvertent / unintentional plagiarism that can be corrected before submission and avoid potential problems.

8.2 Formats and forms

Defined formats allow for variations within and between disciplines, and may differentiate between copies submitted for examination and final copies to be archived. For example, the forms of professional doctorate theses may vary, such as the thesis might take the form of a single large document or it may take the form of a collection (portfolio) of artefacts and documents that demonstrate a coherent body of work at the doctoral level. Nevertheless, the body of work presented must demonstrate achievement of the NFQ Level 10 learning outcomes. More specifically, it must evidence the student's attainment of the learning outcomes required for the professional doctorate.

Electronic copies of final versions of theses are requested and held by the provider.

9 FINAL ASSESSMENT

The assessment of all students is set out in the Core Statutory QA Guidelines. The procedures below are additional procedures for the assessment of research degrees.

9.1 Procedures and national criteria for final assessment of research degrees

The provider's assessment procedures detail the internal and external examiners' roles and responsibilities and the role of any research outputs in this regard.

The following criteria are referenced in the procedures for the assessment of students for research degrees:

- 1) Procedures for assessment of research degrees are consistent with the following:
 - a. The NFQ award type descriptors for research degrees – award type descriptor 'M' for the Masters degree; and award type descriptor 'O' for Doctoral Degrees as set out in Appendix 1 attached. Descriptors for Doctoral and research Masters degrees determine the criteria that are set by the provider and used by assessment boards. These criteria are varied to take into account norms in different subject areas, practice-based research degrees and degrees awarded on the basis of published work. The criteria used are also sufficiently general to facilitate the recognition of a wide range of abilities, and acquired skills and knowledge at the level of the qualification under consideration. These assessment criteria are readily available to research students.
 - b. Procedures for the different elements of assessment for the structured PhD programmes are clear with regard to the impact on the overall PhD result relative to the thesis and the performance of the candidate at the *viva voce*.
 - c. The National Framework of Qualifications Award-type descriptor 'O'- Doctoral Degree also applies to the professional doctorate. The standard requires '*the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers*'. This implies that there is an expectation that each student completing a professional doctorate programme will (at some stage) generate significant peer-reviewed product from their research (such as publications, patents etc.) or alternatively that

their work will have a comparable peer-recognised impact on their profession. A professional doctorate thesis is assessed using a similar process to that used for PhD theses.

There will be a viva voce.

- d. The student must demonstrate the research is their own; that they possess an appreciation of the work in the wider context of the field; that the rigour of the research is beyond question; and that they can have applied basic and advanced research methodologies and techniques to their own work.
- e. The Irish Universities PhD Graduate Skills statement (2nd Edition 2014)⁴ further expands on the National Framework of Qualifications award-type descriptors in a) above.
- f. The Irish Universities Graduate Skills statement on Transferable skills.
- g. The IUQB's *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Higher Education* 2009 ⁵(Chapters 8 and 10, both of which concern assessment) for example (Chapter 10, p.47) states that:

'A PhD is normally awarded on the basis that a body of work carried out by the student makes "a contribution to knowledge" or is "suitable for publication in whole or in part".'

Other aspects are also very important, including:

- ~ The depth and breadth of understanding of the relevant field(s) of study displayed by the student,*
- ~ The expertise gained with respect to basic and advanced methodologies and techniques.*

Evidence as to whether or not such criteria are met will be found in the dissertation, but the oral examination is critical to a full evaluation of a student's competence and of the standards that have been achieved.'

⁴ [The Irish Universities' PhD Graduates Skills Statement 2014](#)

⁵ [Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Higher Education 2009](#)

- 2) Procedures for assessment involve two main stages, namely:
 - a) Assessment by the examiners of the thesis submitted by the candidate, followed by the preparation of reports by each examiner.
 - b) An oral or *viva voce* examination of the candidate by the examiners (acting as an assessment board), followed by a discussion and consensus recommendation on the outcome leading to a final decision and report. A *viva voce* is mandatory for the Doctor of Philosophy degree (and professional doctorate degrees) and is optional but available if requested by either one of the examiners or the student in the case of a Master's degree.

9.2 Role of principal supervisor

The provider normally requires principal supervisors to oversee the final assessments of their research students.

The duties of principal supervisors are clearly defined and include:

- » clarification that supervisors and all members of the supervisory team are ineligible to be examiners in the assessment of any student supervised
- » contributing to individual development plans and formal assessment of students
- » giving advice and timely feedback on thesis preparation
- » agreeing formal assessment schedules and content
- » agreeing work plans/timetables with students, including time limits for feedback to students on thesis drafts as they are produced
- » nomination of potential external examiners to the relevant provider council or board
- » the organisation of all stages of the final assessment process
- » advising students on their readiness to present theses for examination, in consultation with supervisory teams as appropriate
- » facilitating any amendments or revisions to theses that may be required by the assessment board in conjunction with the internal examiner (and the external examiner, as necessary)

9.3 Assessment boards and examiners

Assessment boards for research degree candidates are comprised of at least an external examiner and a second examiner who is normally internal. Boards may include an independent chairperson, who oversees the process but does not participate in decisions relating to awards. The provider has procedures to inform the formal appointment conditions and role for independent board chairs, to ensure independence from the student and supervisory team and with no conflicts of interest.

Procedures in place relating to the appointment of examiners involved in research degree assessment and assessment processes are robust, formal and applied consistently across the provider for all research degrees.

External examiners

External examiners are recognised as research-active experts in the thesis topic of the candidate's research project. Formal and robust procedures and criteria are in place to clarify:

- a) what is meant by 'external' (e.g. from a completely separate provider, from outside Ireland), that are in accord with normal national practice for example, independent of the student and provider with the avoidance of all possible conflicts of interest
- b) what is meant by qualified (e.g. normally qualified to at least the NFQ level of the award sought by the research student)
- c) definitions of research active, in particular if not affiliated with another provider and any additional procedures that may apply
- d) the formal selection, approval and appointment of external examiners
- e) the role and responsibility of external examiners in particular where the opinions of external examiners are given particular weight when assessment boards make final decisions and recommendations
- f) the maintenance of records, for each broad academic/discipline area, of external examiners appointed for research degrees, and such records are available for consultation when new appointments are being considered

Internal examiners

Internal examiners have relevant expertise in the discipline in question, are experienced members of the academic staff of the provider, and act to ensure consistently high internal standards. Procedures and criteria are in place to clarify:

- a) What is meant by an ‘internal’ examiner - the role and responsibility of the internal examiner in particular where the opinions of internal examiners impact on assessment and other decisions. For example, when revisions to a thesis are required by an assessment board and are minor, the board may authorise the internal examiner to work with the principal supervisor and/or the student to ensure, and formally sign off, that the required changes are fully implemented.
- b) Any qualifications and experience required and requirements on the independence of internal examiners relative to the student and research project including the avoidance of all possible conflicts of interest.
- c) The selection, approval and appointment of internal examiners.
- d) The requirements for the maintenance of records, for each broad academic/discipline area, of internal examiners appointed for research degrees, and such records are available for consultation when new appointments are being considered.

Procedures are in place to enable students to raise concerns known to them regarding the proposed examiners in advance of their appointment.

Procedures are in place to inform candidates of possible board members in advance of their appointment.

Additional examiners

Procedures are in place to ensure that a second external examiner is appointed and included on assessment boards when:

- » the candidate is a member of staff of the provider
- » the candidate’s research project is multi-disciplinary
- » available internal expertise is limited
- » other circumstances are identified as appropriate by the provider

Procedures should also be set out for cases where additional internal or external examiners are required to be appointed or replaced for a range of circumstances including those that are unforeseen.

9.4 Assessment procedures

In addition to the assessment procedures set out in the Core Statutory QA guidelines, procedures for assessment include:

- » Set minimum times between the submission of a thesis for examination and the oral assessment. Such procedures should avoid unreasonable delays.
- » Requirements for providing timely notice of the (confirmed) date and time of the oral examination process.
- » A clear description of the examination process from start to finish and procedures for making this available to all concerned.
- » A description of suitable facilities and supports to be made available for students including any arrangements for disabilities.
- » Timely notification of alternative facilities, for example, normally, all examiners and the student are physically present in the same room for the oral examination. When unavoidable, videoconference facilities may need to be used when they are assured to be of a high quality and students are given good notice of this arrangement.
- » Retention of final assessment reports and all final records of formally notified issues by the provider and readily accessible for evaluation purposes.
- » Regular reviews of the effectiveness of assessment procedures by the provider involving research students and graduates, including their benchmarking with those used in other research providers.

9.5 Outcomes and revisions

Procedures require that:

- » all potential outcomes to research degree assessment and examinations are clearly worded and communicated to all involved

- » the list of options on the outcomes are consistent with the maintenance of academic standards and assessment criteria (as set out in Section 9)
- » the provider defines the process for corrections and amendments to theses, and re-examinations
- » the provider defines the minimum basic characteristics for the reports that examiners prepare for the provider's examinations board

Procedures are in place to deal with cases of examiner disagreement including the assessment outcome. This includes procedures for re-submitting a thesis for examination and a repeat oral examination.

Procedures are in place to ensure:

- » communication by assessment boards of clear and succinct rationales to candidates for the verdicts or outcome of their *viva voce* oral examination
- » the process for students to complete revisions and/or amendments required by assessment boards and previously approved by the external examiner and/or internal examiner

The provider has a procedure in place to deal with situations where research degree students do not carry out satisfactorily, or within a reasonable time, specified changes to theses required by assessment boards. This will include clarity on the consequences for students of non-completion of required changes which are made clear to candidates from the outset.

Final decisions related to the outcomes of final research degree assessments, and where appropriate decisions that a student may progress to graduation, are made by appropriate bodies in the provider in accord with the regulations of the provider.

9.6 Appeals

The provider has a defined appeal mechanism that is available to any research degree candidate who wishes to appeal the decision of his/her assessment board. The description of this mechanism is clear, comprehensive and up-to-date, and is readily and openly available to students and staff.

10 CONTINUOUS QUALITY MONITORING

10.1 Core data

Procedures are in place to ensure that:

- » Data collection related to research degree programmes and decisions on what is recorded, how and by whom, are managed at a high level within the provider.
- » The HEI has systems that capture and maintain quantitative data on research degree programmes and allow reasonable access to relevant basic numbers and statistics for each category of programme. Such data are available online to relevant officers and bodies, and can be partitioned easily to allow trends to be followed in different disciplines and research areas, and comparisons to be made.

10.2 Student and graduate tracking

Research student information systems are capable of tracking individual students as they are registered, are required to exit a programme, are transferred and re-registered, are temporarily de-registered, submit theses for assessment, are finally assessed and are formally passed by an examination board. Participation rates for induction, awareness and skills training are also monitored.

Graduates and (importantly) non-completing students are asked for feedback, and the careers of graduates are monitored for so long as this is feasible.

10.3 Supervisor and examiner monitoring

Procedures are in place for the recording and periodic analysis of all supervisor and examiner appointments. These records are available to officers and staff making decisions on supervisor and examiner nominations or confirmations.

10.4 Thesis quality

Procedures to undertake periodic reviews of research theses in each broad discipline/research area are specified with the objectives of evaluating the ongoing quality of research theses and ensuring continuous high standards.

10.5 Issue and complaint logging

While respecting confidentiality and anonymity, procedures are in place to record information on substantive matters raised by research students and others, with the objective of identifying and addressing ongoing recurring issues.

10.6 Periodic review

Procedures are in place to carry out reviews of research degree programmes at intervals not exceeding five years. Self-assessment in preparation for such reviews includes benchmarking exercises with other providers of high standing in their provision of research degree programmes. Review teams include international and national experts, representatives of employers and recent research graduates. The provider is open to and welcomes external evaluations that cover its research degree programmes.

10.7 Linkage to quality improvement

Procedures for use of data, statistics, records and the outcomes of reviews relating to research degree programmes is supported by management and established as essential to effective governance and good decision-making, risk assessment and continuous quality improvement (see also Sections 1.3 and 1.4).

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1

NFQ AWARD TYPE DESCRIPTORS

National Qualifications Framework (NFQ)

“The Irish NFQ is a framework through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way. The many different types and sizes of qualifications included in the NFQ are organised based on their level of knowledge, skill and competence.”

([http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-\(NFQ\).aspx](http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-(NFQ).aspx))

Award type descriptors for qualifications at each level are set out in the link below:

Doctoral Degrees

Doctor of Philosophy Degree Standard

The standard (of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired) for the PhD degree is the HET *Generic Standards for the Doctoral Degree* (NFQ Award-type descriptor ‘O’).

Title	Doctoral Degree Descriptor ‘O’
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
NFQ Level	10
Volume	Large
Knowledge - breadth	A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning

Title	Doctoral Degree Descriptor 'O'
Knowledge - kind	The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate a significant range of the principal skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials which are associated with a field of learning; develop new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge
Competence - context	Exercise personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent contexts
Competence - role	Communicate results of research and innovation to peers; engage in critical dialogue; lead and originate complex social processes
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to critique the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts
Competence - insight	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and lead action to change them
Progression & Transfer	

Professional Doctorate Degree Standard

The generic standard for the professional doctorate shall be the NFQ Award-type descriptor 'O'- Doctoral Degree as set out above.

As noted the standard requires '*the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers*'. This implies that there is an expectation that each learner completing a professional doctorate programme will (at some stage) generate significant peer-reviewed product from their research (such as publications, patents etc.) or alternatively that their work will have a comparable peer-recognised impact on their profession.

Master Degree Award type Descriptor

Title	Masters Degree level 9
Purpose	This is a multi-purpose award-type. The knowledge, skill and competence acquired are relevant to personal development, participation in society and community, employment, and access to additional education and training.
NFQ Level	9
Volume	Large
Knowledge – breadth	A systematic understanding of knowledge at, or informed by, the forefront of a field of learning
Knowledge – kind	A critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, generally informed by the forefront of a field of learning
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate a range of standard and specialised research or equivalent tools and techniques of enquiry
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Select from complex and advanced skills across a field of learning; develop new skills to a high level, including novel and emerging techniques
Competence - context	Act in a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill defined contexts
Competence - role	Take significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups; lead and initiate activity
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to self-evaluate and take responsibility for continuing academic/professional development
Competence - insight	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them
Progression & Transfer	Progression to programmes leading to Doctoral Degree, or to another Masters Degree or to a Post-graduate Diploma

APPENDIX 2

INTERPRETATIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS

National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

“The Irish NFQ is a framework through which all learning achievements may be measured and related to each other in a coherent way. The many different types and sizes of qualifications included in the NFQ are organised based on their level of knowledge, skill and competence.”

([http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-\(NFQ\).aspx](http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/National-Framework-of-Qualifications-(NFQ).aspx))

Research

In the context of these guidelines, ‘research’ covers a wide variety of activities but always represents a careful study or investigation based on a systematic understanding and critical awareness of knowledge. It covers innovative work in the whole range of academic, scientific, technological and professional fields, including the humanities and creative arts. In all of these contexts, ‘research’ is understood to involve the integration of rigour, reflection and critique.

Research degrees

Masters Degrees, NFQ level 9

Research Masters degrees have an integral research project as the dominant component. Their purpose is to enable students to carry out substantial research in a particular area or discipline, and to prepare for the next stage in their careers, whether pursuing further research or immediate employment in a range of other roles.

Doctoral Degrees, NFQ level 10

The Doctor of Philosophy degree (PhD) is the predominant Doctoral-level degree. The PhD is awarded primarily on the basis of a research project that has original publishable research as an outcome. The MD (doctor of medicine) is also primarily a research degree. There are, in addition, professional Doctoral degrees that usually include the name of the discipline (e.g. EdD for Doctor of Education) and consist of a combination of course work, examination, professional practice, research and a thesis.

Structured research degree programmes

The 'structured' PhD or 'structured' research master programme is characterised by:

- » Institutional policies that ensure supportive research environments, including systematic protocols for the monitoring of student development and the progress of the research,
- » Provisions that enable participation of more than one suitable person in supervision and decision making, and
- » Training of students in generic and transferable skills, which includes knowledge of ethics and research integrity, and general research and technical skills, as well as problem-solving, communication, self-management, enterprise, and teamwork.

Professional Doctorate

The professional doctorate is 'an award at a *doctoral level* where the field of study is a *professional discipline* and which is distinguished from the PhD by a title that refers to that profession.' The Professional Doctorate and the PhD share the same award-type descriptor in the National Framework of Qualifications. This interpretation defines a professional doctorate for the purpose of this document/policy. Professional doctorate degrees are normally highly structured and include a significant prescribed course of study. Nevertheless, the production by the learner of an individual **thesis** (*here meaning a coherent body of work on a specific topic particular to the learner*) will be a major part of any professional doctorate programme. This is because the kind of knowledge that the professional doctorate programme must lead to is, according to the doctoral award standard, '*the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers.*' This product cannot be taught and must be developed by the learner. Here,

the significance of doctoral level is that a candidate for a professional doctorate must attain the learning outcomes set out in the National Framework of Qualifications Award-type descriptor 'O'- Doctoral Degree. The meaning of the term professional discipline may be inferred from the following examples of professional disciplines: 'engineering', 'clinical psychology', 'business administration', 'law', etc.

A consequence of the definition is that the professional doctorate and the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) are not independent—there are PhDs that could be professional doctorates and *vice versa*. Scott et al., (2004) identify the following defining features of the Professional Doctorate:

- (1) A focus on professional work
- (2) A focus on the development of the individual in relation to their professional work
- (3) A significant taught element
- (4) The specification of learning outcomes
- (5) Cohort-based pedagogies (in general, UK CGE 2004 survey finds this is not universal)
- (6) A shorter length of thesis than that for the PhD, but with the same requirement for originality
- (7) The Professional Doctorate is closely related to the development of practice within the profession concerned and may be accredited by a professional body and result in a professional qualification.
- (8) Reference to profession or professional is usually made in the title of the Professional Doctorate award.

Professional doctorate programmes envisaged by this document may have some or all of these features.

IUA Graduate Skills Statement (second edition 2015)

The following skills and attributes, as articulated in the IUA PhD Graduates' Skills statement (second edition, 2015), as

- » key educational objectives for all graduates of Irish doctoral programmes:
- » research skills and awareness;
- » ethics and social understanding;

- » communication skills;
- » personal effectiveness/development;
- » team-working and leadership;
- » career management;
- » entrepreneurship and innovation.

APPENDIX 3

GLOSSARY OF RECOMMENDED TERMS, TITLES ETC.

(UNDER DEVELOPMENT)

RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning
HEI	Higher Education Institution
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
RDPs	Research Degree Programmes
NFDE	National Framework for Doctoral Education