UK Quality Code
for Higher Education

Advice and Guidance

Research Degrees

UKSCQA
UK Standing Committee for Quality Assessment

QAA

UK Quality Code – Advice and Guidance
Research Degrees

Contents

Regulatory contexts for the Quality Code

The Quality Code articulates a set of principles that apply across the UK through four Expectations. These Expectations are then explained and contextualised through Core and Common practices in a way that allows institutions to demonstrate them. The Expectations, Core and Common practices are not regulatory requirements in England, but the Practices should be demonstrated by providers operating in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

National regulators and QAA are not bound by the information in this advice and guidance and will not view it as containing indicators of compliance. This guidance does not interpret statutory requirements.

Terminology

Doctoral degrees: Doctoral degrees are qualifications rooted in original research – the creation of new knowledge or originality in the application of knowledge. The doctorate is, therefore, unique in the array of qualifications offered by higher education providers. Other key reference points for doctoral degrees are the doctoral qualification descriptors included in the national higher education qualification frameworks for England, Wales and Northern Ireland and for Scotland, and the QAA *Doctoral Degree Characteristics Statement* (2015).

Masters by research: Research master's degrees and doctorates are closely linked because of the emphasis in both on independent research. Research students may choose to register for a research master's degree either as a standalone research qualification or as an entry qualification for a doctorate. The QAA *Master's Degree Characteristics Statement* (2015) summarises the main features of research master's degrees, including a general description of the characteristics relevant to research master's degrees.

Research students: The higher education sector recognises the diverse needs of research students and aims to encourage consistency of provision for all students, regardless of background or circumstances. The Expectations and Core and Common practices are therefore intended to apply to the many different types of students undertaking UK research degrees. These include full and part-time students, UK and international students, students from all backgrounds, and those with a range of protected characteristics and prior educational experience.

Graduate schools: Within the UK, research students are often part of a cohort. As well as having a subject identity, they may belong to a graduate school and/or doctoral training centre. Doctoral training centres and other arrangements where higher education providers work together, help to shape the way that many doctoral students are trained.

Codes of practice: Codes of practice for research degrees help both prospective and current research students and staff to know what their responsibilities are and what they can expect from one another. All codes and related guidance are written clearly for, and are accessible to, those who need to use them and contain sufficient information for all intended users, including any externally located supervisors.

Expectations and Practices

The advice underneath the Expectations and Practices is not mandatory for providers but illustrative of a range of possible approaches.

This Theme relates to higher education research in the specific context of research degrees and particular requirements for doctorates and research master's degrees. It refers to the research environment and the supervisory process which are distinct requirements of research degrees and enable higher education providers to provide an effective student experience and maintain academic standards for research degrees. A number of the Themes in the advice and guidance are equally applicable to research degrees and some outline specific guidelines in the context of research degrees.

Expectations for standards

The academic standards of courses meet the requirements of the relevant national qualifications framework.

This Expectation ensures that research degree-awarding bodies align their postgraduate awards with the relevant qualification framework.

The value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualification and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards.

This Expectation ensures that research degrees awarded by providers continue to reflect sector-recognised standards such as the QAA Doctoral Degrees Characteristic Statement.

Core practice

- **The provider ensures that students who are awarded qualifications have the opportunity to achieve standards beyond the threshold level that are reasonably comparable with those achieved in other UK providers.**
  In practice, this means that the provision of a research environment conducive to learning and developing research combined with the provision of encouraging and supportive supervision, would improve opportunities for research students to achieve beyond the threshold level.

Common practice

- **The provider reviews its core practices for standards regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.**
  In practice, this means that research degrees form a distinct area of provision and therefore review and enhancement activity should be viewed across both in the context of provider practices, across all provision in order to consider any implications for research degrees and provider practices that only relate to research degrees.

Courses are well-designed, provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed.

Expectations for quality

From admission through to completion, all students are provided with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education.

This Expectation relates to the provision of research supervision, environment, progression and examination of research degrees. Higher education providers have in place mechanisms for the monitoring and enhancement of the quality of their provision of research degrees that is both inclusive and supportive of students.

This Expectation encompasses the breadth of subject and supervisory expertise available to research students and the research environment, which will enable students to develop and generate new knowledge through exploration and learning of research.

Core practices

- **The provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses.**
  In practice, this means that supervision of research students equates to the delivery of a course (albeit a programme of individual research) to ensure that the progress stages and support provided effectively contribute to the delivery and outcomes for research students.
- **Where the provider offers research degrees, it delivers these in appropriate and supportive research environments.**
  In practice, this means that supportive research environments and infrastructure serve to enable positive research outcomes through contextualising research, exposing research students to research culture skills, responding to research students' changing needs, and encouraging creativity, critical independent thought and originality of research outcomes.
- **The provider supports all students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes.**
  In practice, this identifies the need to enable successful outcomes through the support infrastructure and contributing factors including regulatory frameworks, research environment, supervisory processes, research skills support, progress and review arrangements, and clarity of responsibilities.

Guiding principles

The guiding principles given here are not mandatory for any provider. They are a concise expression of the fundamental practices of the higher education sector, based on the experience of a wide range of providers. They are intended as a framework for providers to consider when establishing new or looking at existing higher education provision. They are not exhaustive and there will be other ways for providers to meet their requirements.

1 Provision of information is clear and accessible to research students and staff.

Providers that have research degree awarding powers have specific regulations and codes of practice for research degrees that are clear, regularly reviewed and accessible to research students and staff, including examiners. Responsibilities of research students and staff supervising, assessing and supporting research students are clearly communicated.

2 The research environment is supportive and inclusive for all research students.

Providers accept research students into a sustainable, inclusive and supportive research environment for undertaking and learning about research throughout the programme of study. The environment should support/facilitate research achievement, taking account of the diverse needs of research students.

3 Supervisors are appropriately skilled and supported.

Providers ensure that each student has an appropriately skilled and knowledgeable supervisory team, which includes a main supervisor as the key contact. Supervisors should be provided with sufficient time, support and opportunities to develop and maintain their supervisory practice.

4 Research students are afforded opportunities for professional development.

Providers ensure that research students are provided with appropriate opportunities to regularly reflect on and develop their personal, professional and research skills in consultation with their supervisory team.

5 Progression monitoring is clearly defined and operated.

Providers put in place clearly defined mechanisms for monitoring and supporting research student progress and outcomes from admission to successful completion, including formal and explicit reviews of progress at different stages.

6 Higher education providers offer clear guidance and processes on assessment for research degrees.

Providers, recognising the underpinning principles applicable to all assessment (see also Assessment Theme), operate robust and clear procedures for assessing research degrees, taking into account the UK qualification descriptors and characteristic statements.

Practical advice

This section provides practical, contextualised advice to providers on Research Degrees. The information is set against the guiding principles the advice will help you achieve. Please bear in mind that this guidance is illustrative and intended to inform the approaches you consider and ultimately implement.

Provision of information is clear and accessible to research students and staff (Guiding principle 1)

Explicit academic frameworks and regulations, policies, guidance and Codes of practice for research degrees are made available to prospective and current research students and staff. The diverse needs of research students (for example, distance learning, part-time, international students, and those with personal and professional commitments) would be considered throughout the provision and signposting of this information.

Information is likely to include:

- requirements for recruitment to the programme and conditions of acceptance
- procedures for considering claims for the recognition of prior learning
- supervision arrangements, including evaluation, monitoring and review procedures; and the names, contact details and responsibilities of the main and other supervisors
- support structures at different organisational levels, for example, department, school, faculty, doctoral training centre, graduate school, research centre, or research institute; and clear signposting where students can find essential information
- opportunities that exist for meeting other research students and staff, and for developing scholarly competence and independent thought
- academic and procedural requirements for particular postgraduate research qualifications, including the requirements for progression, monitoring and review for each qualification and the minimum and maximum periods within which the programme may be completed
- assessment methods, requirements and procedures, including the criteria for achieving the qualification
- research integrity and ethics, including avoiding plagiarism, and intellectual property rights and responsibilities
- complaints and appeals processes
- details on where to find other relevant information.

Providers give research students an early opportunity to meet supervisors to agree on plans for the course of study including initial objectives of the research, the development and general education needs of the research student, communication methods and frequency of meetings, and the means of monitoring progress. Supervisors and research students are made fully aware of the extent of one another's responsibilities, to enable both to understand the supervisors' contribution to supporting the research student and where the supervisors' responsibilities end.

Supervisor responsibilities may include:

- introducing the research student to the department (or equivalent), its facilities and other colleagues, including operational procedures and health and safety practices and requirements
- providing satisfactory, accurate and ongoing guidance and advice or directing the student to alternative sources of information for both academic matters and career development
- establishing and maintaining regular contact with the research student (as per the higher education provider's guidance)
- contributing to the assessment of the research student's development needs
- providing timely, constructive and effective feedback on the research student's work and monitoring their overall progress within the programme

- ensuring that the research student is aware of the need to exercise probity and conduct their research according to ethical principles, including intellectual property rights, and of the implications of research misconduct
- providing effective pastoral support and/or referring the research student to other sources of such support, including student advisers, graduate school staff and others within the research student's academic community including, where appropriate, support for mental health and well-being
- helping the research student to interact with others working in the field of research, for example, encouraging the research student to attend relevant conferences and supporting them in seeking funding for such events, or in potential career pathways
- where appropriate, giving encouragement and guidance to the research student on the submission of conference papers and articles to refereed journals
- maintaining the necessary supervisory expertise, including the appropriate skills, to perform the role satisfactorily, supported by relevant continuing professional development opportunities.

Student responsibilities may include:

- maintaining regular contact with supervisors and progressing their research through preparation for meetings with supervisors, completion of agreed objectives and deadlines
- taking responsibility for their own learning and progress and seeking timely support where required
- proactively pursuing their own personal and professional development and attending agreed development opportunities
- raising awareness of circumstances or concerns that may affect their work with their supervisor or other staff members
- adhering to regulations that affect them including those related to the degree, health and safety, intellectual property and ethical research.

The induction of research students should signpost this information. The approach to induction will vary upon the nature of the provider, the course of study and the diverse needs of the student body.

Reflective questions

- How are your regulations and codes of practice for research degrees, clear and accessible to prospective and current research students and staff, including examiners?
- How are the diverse needs of research students reflected in your regulations and codes of practice?
- How and where are the roles and responsibilities of research students and supervisors made clear and accessible?

The research environment is supportive and inclusive for all research students (Guiding principle 2)

Exposure to an active research environment develops understanding of the stages involved in research and serves to encourage developing thoughts and original ideas.

Common features of an effective research environment include:

- originality, significance and rigour of research outputs recognised through peer review or through the award of grants resulting in outputs such as journal publications, books and work produced in other media
- capacity of research-active staff (including postdoctoral researchers and research students)
- knowledge exchange and impacts (including knowledge transfer partnerships) with an emphasis on the practical impact of research outcomes and demonstrable ability to attract external funding.

The research environment and infrastructure are enabling, instructional and adaptable, taking into account:

- subject discipline (including interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary subjects)
- research degrees offered by the provider
- the diverse range of students recruited; and their changing circumstances throughout the programme of study
- practice or work-based study
- student health and well-being.

Common features of an appropriate environment in which to do and learn about research include:

- exposure to researchers working at the highest level in the student's chosen field/related discipline, and access to other colleagues for advice and support
- opportunities and encouragement to work and exchange ideas with people and organisations using research outcomes for their own purposes and with colleagues in the wider research environment
- adequate learning and research tools including access to IT equipment, library and electronic publications, and specialist equipment
- opportunities for research students to develop peer support networks where issues or problems can be discussed informally
- supervision that encourages the development and successful pursuit of a programme of research
- guidance on the ethical pursuit of research and the importance of academic integrity
- support in developing research-related skills and access to development opportunities that contribute to the research student's ability to complete the programme successfully, and develop personal and employment-related skills
- availability of advice on career development.

Reflective questions

- How does your research environment allow for postgraduate researchers to access supportive peer networks?
- How does your research environment take account of student diversity, health and well-being?
- How well does your research environment support the engagement of research students in their discipline, internally and externally, and in their department or institution more broadly (for example, engaging in committees, or having opportunities to go to conferences)?
- How is your research environment informed by the feedback received from research students?
- How does the research environment serve to facilitate research achievement?

Supervisors are appropriately skilled and supported (Guiding principle 3)

Providers use criteria for supervisor appointment and keep supervisor performance and eligibility in the role under review. These criteria normally include evidence of successful supervision to completion and may also consider contract stability for those supervisors who are employed on a fixed-term basis. The overall workload of the individual should also be taken into account to ensure supervisors have time for sufficient contact with, and support of, each research student.

All supervisors (including those working in industry or professional practice) are expected to engage in professional development opportunities to equip them to select and supervise research students effectively across a range of circumstances, from initial meetings to completion. Supervisors are sensitive to the diverse needs of individual research students and the associated support that may be required in different situations. Through professional development opportunities and other means, higher education providers ensure that supervisors are aware of the range of support available and can communicate to their research students how to access it. Providers show their support for, and reward the valuable contribution of, supervisors to the research environment and share good practice through mechanisms such as mentoring relationships for new supervisors.

Supervision arrangements vary depending on the structure for research student support that the higher education provider adopts, and on any guidance provided by the funding body where relevant. In all cases, each research student has an identified single point of contact who is the main supervisor. In addition to the main supervisor, there will be a supervisory team which will encompass the breadth of academic, pastoral, and skills knowledge and experience.

The supervisory team may include:

- other supervisors and research staff in the subject area
- a departmental adviser to postgraduate students
- a faculty postgraduate tutor
- other individuals in similar roles.

Scope of experience and knowledge across the supervisory team ensures that the student always has access to someone with experience of supporting research students from recruitment through to examination and successful completion of their programme. Between them, the supervisors and other relevant staff members ensure that research students receive sufficient support and guidance to facilitate their success. At least one member of a student's supervisory team is currently engaged in excellent research in the relevant discipline(s), ensuring that the direction and monitoring of the student's progress is informed by up-to-date subject knowledge and research developments.

Providers will communicate minimum expectations of contact between supervisors and students as well as the detailed requirements of progress reporting. Research students and supervisors share the responsibility for ensuring that regular and frequent contact is maintained. The nature and frequency of contact between research student and supervisor varies depending on the discipline, duration of the programme, approaches to the research, and the amount of support needed by the research student, but should adhere to the minimum expectations of the provider. The outputs of supervisory meetings should be recorded by both the student and the supervisory team, to ensure shared understanding between the two parties. Supervisor records may contain information on the setting of objectives and progress made, key feedback areas, areas of discussion, debate or disagreement, and concerns raised.

Providers ensure that research students are easily able to contact their supervisors for advice and guidance throughout their programme, irrespective of their geographical location. Reasonable accessibility of supervisors is given priority and providers assure themselves that research students and supervisors are aware of the importance of this and have a shared understanding of what is reasonable. It is made clear to the research student who the alternative contact is if the main supervisor is not available.

If, and when, a main supervisor is not able to continue supervising the research student, another appropriate supervisor is appointed to assume the role. Higher education providers take a view on how long a main supervisor may be absent before a permanent replacement is appointed, bearing in mind the importance of providing breadth and continuity of supervision for the research student in determining this period. In some circumstances, another supervisor is asked to assume the role of main supervisor while a replacement main supervisor is found and the minimum frequency of contact in operation by the provider should be maintained.

If a research student-supervisor relationship is not working well, students will have access to alternative, independent sources of advice. Mechanisms whereby research students may raise concerns regarding supervision are in place and students are made clear on what these are (see also Concerns, Complaints and Appeals Theme). Research students or supervisors may, where permitted by the terms of any sponsorship agreement, request that supervisory responsibilities be changed. Higher education providers ensure that any changes are appropriate, handled sensitively and in consultation with the relevant parties.

Reflective questions

- Are all supervisors given opportunities to undertake relevant training and professional development?
- Do you have clear criteria for how supervisors are appointed?
- Do you have effective mechanisms for ensuring the minimum expectations of contact between research students and supervisory teams are met?

Research students are afforded opportunities for professional development (Guiding principle 4)

Research students may need support to develop their subject-specific, research, communication and other skills they require to become effective researchers, to enhance their employability and assist their career progress after completion of their degree (as defined in the Vitae Researcher Development Statement). These skills may, to varying extents, be present on commencement and require further development; need to be explicitly taught; or need to be developed during the research programme.

Opportunities for developing personal, professional and research skills are:

- integrated, sometimes as mandatory elements (for example, research skills modules) in research provision
- considerate of the diverse needs of individual students (including students' prior experience, the environments in which they may later draw upon these skills, and specific discipline and individual characteristics)
- designed to maximise the effectiveness of training in developing both generic and research-focused skills
- negotiated, reviewed and evaluated through the supervision and annual review process, and monitored against progression and completion targets
- regularly evaluated by providers, considering appropriate advice from external sources and funding bodies to ensure that student needs are met.

Providing research students with an opportunity to support learning and teaching, develops a range of skills and reinforces their own knowledge of the subject. Providers may offer research students non-compulsory teaching opportunities; these may be limited and not necessarily available to all research students. For their own benefit and to safeguard the experience of the taught students, research students receive appropriate training, support and mentoring if they are teaching. Mentoring can be provided by membership of larger teaching teams, and support should ensure that teaching duties are not so intensive or time consuming as to affect completion.

Reflective question

- Are there opportunities for postgraduate researchers to develop a range of personal and professional-related skills to aid them in their future careers?

Progression monitoring is clearly defined and operated (Guiding principle 5)

Such processes operate less regularly than meetings between research student and supervisor, and may include:

- an annual review by a panel or other specified body such as a research degrees committee
- completing probationary periods of training
- transferring from a research master's to a doctoral degree.

Research students are normally present at such reviews and usually provide, as a minimum, a written submission. Reviews usually include the research student's main supervisor (as an observer) but research students can request the opportunity to meet a review panel without the supervisors being present.

The main purpose of the monitoring process is to provide overall support for the research student to maximise the likelihood of completing the research programme successfully within an appropriate timescale. The monitoring process also enables staff to ascertain when a research student's progress is not satisfactory and allowing for support to be given to help the research student make improvements.

Progression requirements may vary depending on the type and nature of the programme, for example, professional or practice-based doctorates may have a requirement for research students to pass structured elements of a programme before progressing. Formal evaluation of progress in these circumstances may involve summative assessment.

So that both the research student and the supervisor can plan adequately for monitoring arrangements, including through preparation of relevant documents and consultation with other individuals as appropriate, higher education providers make available information relating to:

- guidance and requirements of the monitoring process
- frequency and target dates of monitoring arrangements
- the implications of the possible outcomes of formal review meetings or assessments
- the criteria to be used for making decisions about the extension, suspension or termination of a research student's registration
- the circumstances in which research student complaint and appeal mechanisms may be used and how to use them (see also Concerns, Complaints and Appeals Theme).

Regulations specify the minimum and maximum periods within which the research student can complete the research programme.

Bearing these in mind, decisions about transferring a student's registration to a doctoral qualification, or confirming such a registration, take place when there is sufficient evidence to assess the student's performance.

Reflective questions

- How effective are requirements in place for progression between stages of research?
- How do you successfully monitor the progress of students through the life cycle of their research degree?
- How effective are your mechanisms for identifying and implementing support for students who are not progressing satisfactorily?

Higher education providers offer clear guidance and processes on assessment for research degrees **(Guiding principle 6)**

Providers ensure that all research students are provided with an assessment experience that enables them to fully demonstrate their academic achievements. Research students are examined on the basis of an appropriate body of work and an oral examination (viva). Research students and examiners are provided with any required information prior to the viva to ensure they have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

Providers offer practical advice, training or support to research students to prepare for submission of their thesis, for example, on the required presentation of the work, and viva. Support may include training, written guidance and/or opportunities to participate in a mock viva or similar experience.

Providers ensure that clear criteria are in place for the appointment of an examination panel. These commonly include:

- the appointment of a minimum of two appropriately qualified examiners, at least one of whom is external to the research degree-awarding body and none of whom are the students' supervisor
- additional external examiners may be appointed where the research student is also a member of staff or where the thesis is highly interdisciplinary
- where more than two examiners are appointed, the majority are generally from outside the research degree-awarding body.

Where one of the examiners is new to the process, the other examiner(s) should have sufficient experience to ensure academic rigour. Clear criteria guide the use of external examiners when they have had previous affiliations with the provider. Researchers who have had substantial co-authoring or collaborative involvement in the candidate's work or whose own work is the focus of the research project, should not be appointed as examiners. An independent Chair, who will not contribute to the assessment judgement, may be appointed to the examination panel. Guidance on the Chair's role and responsibilities and details about the circumstances in which a Chair will be used should be provided. The use of an independent Chair encourages consistency in examination processes and provides an additional viewpoint if the conduct of the viva should become the subject of a research student appeal. Where an independent Chair is not appointed, providers should find alternative ways of assuring fairness and consistency that are acceptable to the candidate and enable him/her to know that the viva is being conducted appropriately.

Assessment criteria should be clearly available to research students and may vary to reflect differences by discipline, such as the potential for inclusion of non-book components (for example, a piece of software, a performance, or visual arts), professional/practice-based research degrees and/or doctorates by, or incorporating, published work. Best practice may include examiners submitting separate, independent written reports before the viva and submitting a joint report detailing the outcome after the viva. The research degree-awarding body should provide any required information or support prior to the viva to ensure that all parties have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities, as well as providing explicit guidance on:

- the range of assessment outcomes open to the examiners, including referral or resubmission, or awarding a qualification different from the one for which the research student has been examined
- the information and support to be given if a research student is asked to revise and resubmit the thesis, including due regard for the length of time permitted for working on a resubmission of a thesis and the status of a student while they are working towards that goal
- any parties who need to be notified of the result (for example, the research student's sponsor) of the assessment
- whether the same examiners are to be used in the event of a resubmission.

Providers establish processes to handle cases where examiners cannot reach a consensus and have explicit rules on whether the student's supervisor may be present as an observer, with the research student's agreement.

Reflective questions

- What criteria do you have in place for the appointment of examiners?
- How do you ensure that research degree examinations are consistent, equitable and fit for purpose?

Monitoring and evaluation

Providers with research degree provision are expected to monitor and evaluate their provision against internal and external indicators and targets that reflect the context in which research degrees are being offered. All providers with research degree provision will need to demonstrate that they are meeting the outcomes relevant to research in the Expectations and Core practices of the Quality Code.
Internally, providers can use the guiding principles for research degrees as set out in this Theme to gauge the effectiveness of their monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. (See also Monitoring and Evaluation Theme.)

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