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UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

QUALITY ASSURANCE COMMITTEE



CELEBRATING
525 YEARS
1495 – 2020

Mapping Against the UK Quality Code

SECTION 10: RESEARCH DEGREES

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SECTION 10: RESEARCH DEGREES

INTRODUCTION

The Quality Code is split into 12 themes, available online on the QAA website at <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code>. As part of this, *Research Degrees* focuses on the degrees to be obtained by means of research, including Doctoral degrees and Masters by Research, for example. The theme outlines the appropriate principles to be adhered to with regards to standards of supervision and an effective student experience. The Quality Code describes this theme as:

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.

In practice, this theme looks to ensure the appropriate arrangements are in place for research degrees and that research students have adequate support in place in order to effectively achieve their degree. It also focuses on the other roles which impact a research degree, such as the supervisor and support staff.

In defining key terms that are used frequently in this section, the Quality Code notes the following:

Doctoral degrees: Doctoral degrees are qualifications rooted in original research - the creation of new knowledge or originality in the application of knowledge.

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.

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.

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.

SECTION 10: RESEARCH DEGREES

The Quality Code has three different sections: the expectations for standards; the expectations for quality; and the guiding principles. The relevant expectations for standards and quality are detailed below. The Guiding Principles are mapped to the University's own policies, procedures and quality mechanisms. There are two separate sections for the University's practices, detailing what the University does and has in place to support that expectation/principle, as well as the supporting documentation, which includes reference to supporting policy, procedure, website or other document.

EXPECTATIONS FOR STANDARDS & CORE/Common Practices	EXPECTATIONS FOR QUALITY & CORE/Common Practices
The academic standards of courses meet the requirements of the relevant national qualifications framework.	Courses are well-designed, provide a high-quality academic experience for all students and enable a student's achievement to be reliably assessed.
The value of qualifications awarded to students at the point of qualification and over time is in line with sector-recognised standards.	From admission through to completion, all students are provided with the support that they need to succeed in and benefit from higher education.
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	The provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses.
The provider reviews its core practices for standards regularly and uses the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement.	Where the provider offers research degrees, it delivers these in appropriate and supportive research environments. The provider supports all students to achieve successful academic and professional outcomes.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES	UNIVERSITY PRACTICES	SUPPORTING DOCUMENTATION
GUIDING PRINCIPLES		
<p>1. Provision of information is clear and accessible to research students and staff.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>There is a significant amount of information for students and supervisors that is essential for the management of PGR students and Research degrees. To this end, policies and processes related to Postgraduate Research Degrees are contained within the Code of Practice (CoP), General Regulations for Research Degrees and the PGR handbook. This ensures there are central locations for all documentation to be referenced. Each of the documents is produced in an accessible format and contains cross reference and links to other relevant information.</p>	<p>General Regulations for Research Degrees (Webpage) Code of Practice for Research Degrees (Webpage) PGR Handbook (Webpage) PGR Handbook (Webpage) Supervisor Handbook (Webpage) Academic Quality Handbook (Webpage) Statement of Expectations for PGR students and supervisors (webpage)</p>

<p>Responsibilities of research students and staff supervising, assessing and supporting research students are clearly communicated.</p>	<p>The General Regulations for Research Degrees are reviewed and approved annually by the Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) (as part of the wider annual review of regulations) and the CoP and handbooks are updated accordingly.</p> <p>Students are provided with the PGR handbook at the commencement of their studies and at the start of each academic year. Supervisors and advisors are provided with the revised Code of Practice and PGR Handbook at the start of each academic year so as to ensure that all updated information is accessible. Documents are prepared in accordance with accessibility requirements as outlined in the institutional accessibility framework.</p> <p><u>Supervisor expectations are communicated through mandatory supervisor training courses. The requirement for mandatory training, every 5 years, is articulated in the General Regulations for Research Degrees.</u></p> <p><u>Student expectations are clearly communicated in the Statement of Expectation for PGR students and supervisors and are supported during PGR orientation.</u></p>	
<p>2. The research environment is supportive and inclusive for all research students.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>The University of Aberdeen’s commitment to inclusive and accessible education, which is part of the University’s 2040 Strategy, aims to provide all students with the opportunity to reach their full potential. The University recognises the importance of this in its education practices, learning environments and in addressing harmful stereotypes or limited perspectives.</p> <p>Reflecting its obligations under the Equality Act 2010, the University will not disadvantage or discriminate directly or indirectly in relation to education. All protected characteristics detailed in the Equality Act 2010 are covered in the Inclusivity and Accessibility Framework. The Framework, which has recently been developed as a way of bringing together all information, guidance and support in this area, is used as part of the University’s approach to creating consistency in its standards of inclusion and accessibility for PGR students. The Framework was communicated to</p>	<p>Inclusivity and Accessibility Framework (Webpage) Research Culture (Webpage) Wellbeing Strategy and Policies (Webpage) Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (Webpage) HR Excellence in Research (Webpage) Doctoral Representatives Group (Webpage) PGR Training and Development (Webpage) Guidelines for Supporting Disabled PGR students and disabled PGR inc:usive adjustments</p>

all Schools, including the Postgraduate Research ~~School~~College, through the University Education Committee to ensure that all information is available for implementation.

Additional context and guiding principles for Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (EDI) in relation to PGRs are drawn from our Aberdeen 2040 Strategy and companion strategies for Athena SWAN, the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers and Wellbeing through which we strive towards achieving the highest standards of EDI and includes creating a culture where there is an expectation of research excellence and where researchers can thrive. Commitment to EDI for doctoral education is driven by a deep understanding of the PGR community and the unique space in which it sits within our institution. They are the next generation of research leaders with influence across both student and research communities, linking teaching and research agendas by bringing new ideas and disrupting established ways of thinking. We recognise that each of our PGR students are on an individual journey that cannot be only supported by blanket approaches. Working with teams across our academic Schools and Professional Services, the needs of PGRs are considered early to ensure fairness in recruitment and equity of access to critical support and professional development activities. New activities/policies/plans are discussed and approved within the PGR committee on which two PGR representatives are present at all meetings. PGR Committee actions/decisions are shared with the University Education Committee (UEC) and the Quality Assurance Committee. PGR representatives are drawn from the Doctoral Representatives Group, a platform which brings together each of the School appointed PGR reps regularly to highlight PGR issues.

A Dean for Research Culture was appointed in March 2024 with a remit to provide strategic direction for developing, implementing and evaluating initiatives designed to enhance the way we support a positive research culture for all. Building on the recommendations of the Research Culture Task and Finish Group, Working closely with the PGR College, the specific needs of PGRs will be considered and actioned through the 2020-2024, following scrutiny of the Wellcome Trust's report into research culture

	<p>across the sector, a working group on Research Culture was established to draw together the many examples of good practice and to consult with our researchers, including PGRs, on the questions most important to them, through a series of focus groups. This has encompassed career development, research practice and questions of EDI. The recommendations relevant to PGRs (pending approval) will be taken forward through PGR Committee, associated committees and communicated to PGRs and supervisors via the Code of Practice.</p> <p>All PGR students have access to support structures and resources within the University that are underpinned by a Wellbeing Strategy that includes mechanisms for students to raise issues or challenges. The Strategy outlines our approach to supporting our community to maintain positive wellbeing, and to manage problems and support the prevention of mental and physical ill health, reinforcing the Aberdeen 2040 commitment to care for the wellbeing of our diverse community. All PGRs can access Student Support including Counselling Services and Disability Support teams where advice, guidance, interventions are tailored to PGR requirements and within the boundaries of regulations.</p> <p><u>A specific set of Guidelines for Supporting Disabled Student Researchers has been developed which clearly articulates how support can be actioned and implemented for PGRs. This recognises that PGRs operate very differently from traditional taught students and will have working patterns and environments more like academic members of staff. This also means that adjustments appropriate for UG/PGT students may not be suitable or applicable to PGRs.</u></p>	
<p>3. Supervisors are appropriately skilled and supported.</p> <p>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</p>	<p>General Regulation 23 says <i>“Of the persons appointed to supervise the candidate’s research at least one shall be a Professor, Reader or Lecturer employed by the University, and if the candidate’s research is conducted in one of the local institutions named in Regulation 19, at least one shall be a member of staff of that institution.”</i> A statement of expectation addresses expectations of both doctoral students and supervisors alike.</p> <p>As per our Code of Practice (Section A 4.7; page 32), Supervisors are required to support research students throughout their period of</p>	<p>General Regulations for Research Degrees (Webpage) Code of Practice for Research Degrees (Webpage) Statement of Expectations for PGR Students and Supervisors (Webpage) PGR Supervisor Training (Webpage)</p>

<p>provided with sufficient time, support and opportunities to develop and maintain their supervisory practice.</p>	<p>supervised research and for up to twelve months thereafter if an extension period is required and has been approved, or to completion if sooner.</p> <p>Supervisors are supported through supervisor training and masterclasses through each academic year delivered by the PGR School/College. The training enables all supervisors to meet the required standards for supervision, ethics, integrity and governance and skills training. General Regulation 25 outlines that A all new PhD supervisors (new to supervising and/or new to the University) must undertake mandatory supervisor training and refresher training every five years to remain eligible to serve as supervisors. The mandatory nature of this requirement will be effective from 2022/23.</p> <p>All supervisors and PGR interview panel members are expected to have completed Equality and Diversity and Research Integrity training.</p>	
<p>4. Research students are afforded opportunities for professional development.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>The University of Aberdeen is committed to supporting and mentoring early career researchers through postgraduate studies to a career beyond. In addition to the Postgraduate Research College/School there are other teams across the institution which also provide training for PGR students including Centre for Academic Development, Grants Academy, Public Engagement with Research Unit, Impact and Knowledge Exchange Unit, Digital Research and Training and Documentation teams within IT. The PGR College/School works in partnership with these associated teams to ensure that provision meets the varied needs of each of our PGR students. An online course booking system allows research students to select and book sessions that accord with their own needs.</p> <p>The PGR College/School provides a comprehensive training and development programme for postgraduate researchers, regardless of location or mode of study. The inclusive suite of training provision comprises a mixture of live workshops and on-demand resources for independent learning. Training programmes are designed to provide a diverse range of transferrable skills to ensure that PGR students are equipped to become effective researchers, to stand out in their field and to be competitive as leaders across a range of career paths. Training includes academic writing, communication and engagement, project management,</p>	<p>PGR Training and Development (Webpage) Principles of Learning & Teaching in HE Course (Webpage)</p>

	<p>careers and employability, research leadership and management, teaching, enterprise and entrepreneurship.</p> <p>Training requirements are identified through six-month review exercises, feedback forms, via the Doctoral Reps Group, PGR Committee and informal PGR networks (e.g. PGR Teams site).</p> <p><u>The formal six-month review forms were updated in September 2022 to provide a focus on training needs.</u></p>	
<p>5. Progression monitoring is clearly defined and operated.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p><u>QAA requires annual monitoring of progress. Currently, All UoA</u> research students are subject to bi-annual monitoring assessments to ascertain whether progress has been satisfactory (General Regulation <u>2725</u>).</p> <p>Each student completes a six-month review process and an Annual Progression exercise annually.</p> <p>These exercises provide students and supervisors with opportunities to comment on academic progress and to highlight issues, academic or pastoral that are causing concerns such that these can be acted upon in a timely manner. Clear definitions of each exercise are provided to supervisors and students so that progression requirements, and their operation, are understood.</p> <p>Annual progression exercises are managed within academic Schools and determine whether a student’s progress is satisfactory to permit progressing to the next year of study. Annual progressing exercises are assessed by an independent panel (nominated by PGR Coordinators by the school) and outcomes ratified by School Postgraduate Officers who have delegated authority from Senate to act on behalf of the Quality Assurance Committee.</p> <p>Six month reviews are coordinated by the PGR School and help identify emerging issues and thus early interventions to support PGR students and supervisors. Outcomes are recorded in the Student Records System and communicated to students, supervisors and school administrative teams Where there are issues around engagement in these exercises from PGRs or supervisors PGR Coordinators are involved to address.</p>	<p>General Regulations for Research Degrees (Webpage) Code of Practice for Research Degrees (Webpage) Reviews and Annual Progression Definitions (Webpage) Six Monthly Review (Webpage) Annual Progression Exercise (Webpage)</p>

<p>6. Higher education providers offer clear guidance and processes on assessment for research degrees.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>Assessing the quality of the thesis is the most important of the Examiners' functions (General Regulation 3836) for research degrees, which requires that for the degree of PhD, DPT, EdD, EngD, MD or ChM, the thesis '<i>makes a distinct contribution to knowledge and affords evidence of originality as shown by the exercise of independent critical powers</i>'; or for the degree of MPhil the thesis '<i>makes a contribution to knowledge and affords evidence of originality</i>'; for a one-year Master's degree the thesis '<i>displays evidence of originality or that it is a satisfactory, orderly and critical exposition of existing knowledge within the field concerned</i>'.</p> <p>The <i>viva voce</i> is conducted by an Internal and External Examiner to examine each thesis and report upon its merits. The Internal and External Examiner are each nominated by the Head of School in which the candidate is based and are expected to be Professors, Readers, Lecturers or academic staff of an equivalent employment grade in the University. Where the candidate is also a member of academic staff, two External Examiners will be appointed together with an internal moderator.</p> <p>The Internal Examiner is responsible for arranging the oral examination normally within two months of the thesis submission. The Internal and External Examiners are equal as examiners, and the External will usually conduct the examination.</p> <p>Examiners are required to submit independent reports and to contribute to a joint report after the <i>viva voce</i> has taken place which gives an account of the oral examination and makes a recommendation of the overall outcome of <i>viva</i>. The decision made by the Examiners at the oral examination is a recommendation and must be approved by a member of the Quality Assurance Committee on behalf of Senate.</p> <p>All internal examiners are provided with the guidance for examining research degrees as part of the Code of Practice and supervisory handbook. Documents are provided as part of mandatory supervisor training. All internal examiners can attend specific training sessions delivered by the</p>	<p>General Regulations for Research Degrees (Webpage) PGR Supervisor Handbook (Webpage) PGR Examiner Guidance (Webpage) Examining Research Degrees, AQH (Document)</p>

	<p>Dean for Quality Assurance and the PGR SchoolCollege. Supervisor training sessions provide guidance about the regulations and processes required for examination as set out in the guidance document linked opposite. Students can access examination information via the handbook and Code of Practice. In addition, individual schools offer Viva and examination prep workshops and the PGR SchoolCollege provides viva examination workshops as part of the core training programme.</p>	
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