



QQI

Quality and Qualifications Ireland
Dearbhú Cáilíochta agus Cáilíochtaí Éireann

Research Degree Programme Policy and Criteria

QQI has adopted policies, criteria and guidelines established by its predecessor bodies and saved under section 84 of the 2012 Act. These are adopted and adapted as necessary, to support new policies issued by QQI and the establishment of QQI services in accordance with the 2012 Act. Over time these policies will be replaced with new QQI policies under the QQI Comprehensive Policy development Programme. All references in this policy document to the predecessor bodies and the associated structures should be read as referring to QQI and its structures.

In the event that there is any conflict between the adopted and adapted legacy policy, criteria and guidelines and QQI policy, the QQI policy will prevail.

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1. Introduction

This policy is a revised consolidated version of earlier research policies which integrates specified national and international guidelines and standards for research education and training (see Section 5.4). Among these are the IUQB's '*Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Higher Education*' 2009 which are adopted by QQI as its main guidelines on the quality assurance of research degree programmes. The use of common standards and guidelines emphasises that the quality expectations for research degree programmes are the same for all providers.

The context has changed since the publication of the earlier research policies (2003-2005). There are now well established national and international guidelines on the quality assurance of research degree programmes. There is also a much wider appreciation of the importance of research and innovation for the well-being of society. Consequently, there is a wider interest in the quality of research education and training programmes.

The basic principles of the earlier research policy are retained. The validation of *research degree programmes* and delegation of authority to make awards in respect of such programmes will continue to be organised by *discipline-area* and by National Framework of Qualifications' (NFQ) level.

The following principles have informed the development research degree programme validation policy and criteria.

- Providers should strategically manage the development of their research degree programmes in a responsible way that maximises the impact of Irish higher education's research and the quality of its research education and products.
- Research degree programmes (including professional doctorates) with industry¹ should be encouraged.
- Collaborative provision should be encouraged as a means of enhancing the quality and competitiveness of research degree programmes.
- Good research practice should be accompanied by good practice in teaching and learning for research students.
- Research activity should enhance and never compromise the quality of teaching and learning at other NFQ levels.
- Validation should:
 - Facilitate the growth of high quality research activity which is relevant to, and compatible with, the provider's mission.
 - Contribute to developing learner-centred research environments which stimulate good research practice.
 - Facilitate a broad diversity of providers, programmes, and learners.

1 Forfas: The Role of PhDs in the Smart Economy December 2009

2. Validation Policy

The research degree programme validation policy and criteria described herein supplement HET *Core Validation Policy and Criteria*.

The policy includes three processes:

- Research approval in a specified discipline-area at a specified NFQ² level (which will be referred to as *research approval*).
- Research accreditation in a specified discipline-area at a specified NFQ level (which will be referred to as *research accreditation*).
- Validation of a professional doctorate programme.

Registered Providers (and consortia of providers) may apply for research approval or research accreditation. When preparing their applications, consortia should also refer to HET *Policy for Collaborative Programmes, Transnational Programmes and Joint Awards*.

A registered provider may only register a student for a research degree programme leading to a QQI award when either:

1. The research falls within the scope of the provider's research accreditation (or delegated authority);
- or
2. The research falls within the scope of the provider's research approval and QQI's prior agreement has been obtained.

2.1 Common Processes

All three validation processes (see Sections 2.2, 2.3 and 2.4) have the following in common:

- The validation process described in HET *Core Validation Policy and Criteria* applies. The process includes self-assessment by the provider and external assessment by an expert panel which normally involves a site visit.
- The expert panel is independent of the provider and constituted on a case-by-case basis in accordance with HETAC's '*Participating in an evaluation panel as an expert assessor: Guidelines*'. Arrangements for the site visit are also made on a case-by-case basis.

2.2 Discipline-area Research Approval

Research approval is a process for the validation of research degree programmes at NFQ levels and/or in discipline-areas where there has been little or no prior provision by the provider concerned.

Research approval provides a platform for a provider to build-up its track record and progress towards meeting the criteria for research accreditation.

2 NFQ means National Framework of Qualifications.

2.2.1 Process and Criteria for Discipline-area Research Approval

An application for validation should include information about the programme (see Section 3.4). It should also be accompanied by a critical self-assessment report against the general validation criteria in Section 3. The criteria provided in Section 3.1 (institutional criteria) and Section 3.3 should be used the first time a provider applies for *research approval* at a new NFQ level (or the first time it applies under this policy). The criteria provided in Section 3.2 (discipline-area criteria) always apply.

2.2.2 Special Conditions attached to Discipline-area Research Approval

Providers with research approval in a specified discipline-area at a specified NFQ level are subject to close monitoring by QQI in this respect and are required to meet the following conditions:

- Notify prospective research students, if not approved at doctoral level in the discipline-area, that they will probably need to change institution to transfer to doctoral level. It is the responsibility of the provider to ensure that such transfer arrangements are in place.
- Obtain independent expert opinion on each prospective student's proposed research project and the agreement of QQI before registering that student (or transferring him/her from the master's register to the doctoral register) (see Appendix 2).
- Provide student registration data to QQI to facilitate monitoring and the making of awards.
- Notify QQI when candidates withdraw from a research degree programme.
- Invite QQI to nominate the independent chairperson (see Section 3.3) for the assessment of candidates for research degrees.
- Self-evaluate approved discipline-areas at least once every five years (or when requested by QQI) and report to QQI using the *Template for the Self-evaluation of Research Degree Programmes* (Section 7).
- Implement any recommendations made by QQI following initial approval or on consideration of any subsequent self-evaluation reports.

2.3 Discipline-area Research Accreditation

Research accreditation is a process for the validation of research degree programmes at NFQ levels and/or discipline-areas where there is a track record demonstrating sustainable intrinsic capacity to comfortably provide the relevant research programmes and independently maintain a register of research students without the need for close monitoring.

2.3.1 Process and criteria for Discipline-area Research Accreditation

An application for validation should include information about the programme (see Section 3.4). It should also be accompanied by a critical self-assessment report against the general validation criteria in Section 3. The criteria provided in Section 3.1 (institutional criteria) and Section 3.3 should be used the first time a provider applies for *research accreditation* at a new NFQ level (or the first time it applies under this policy). The criteria provided in Section 3.2 (discipline-area criteria) always apply.

2.3.2 Special Conditions attached to Discipline-area Research Accreditation

Research accredited providers are required to:

- Notify prospective research students, if not approved at doctoral level in the discipline-area, that they will probably need to change institution to transfer to doctoral level. It is the responsibility of the provider to ensure that such transfer arrangements are in place.
- Provide student registration data to QQI to facilitate monitoring and the making of awards.
- Notify QQI when candidates withdraw from a research degree programme.
- Self-evaluate approved discipline-areas at least once every five years and report to QQI using the *Template for the Self-evaluation of Research Degree Programmes* (Section 7).
- Implement any recommendations made by QQI following initial approval or on consideration of any subsequent self-evaluation reports.

2.4 Validation of Professional Doctorate Programmes

2.4.1 Process and criteria for the validation of professional doctorate programmes

*Professional doctorate programmes*³ will necessarily provide learners with training in the systematic undertaking of *original research or other advanced scholarship*. Therefore, before a professional doctorate programme can be validated by QQI the provider must demonstrate that it meets the criteria for research accreditation at NFQ Level 10 in the relevant discipline-area. If the provider is not already appropriately research accredited then the application for validation of the professional doctorate programme should be accompanied by a critical self-assessment report against the discipline-area criteria in **Section 3.2**. These criteria are for PhD programmes; however, their adaptation to professional doctorate programmes is straightforward.

Normally, professional doctorate programmes are 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. The forms of professional doctorate theses may vary e.g. 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 NFQ Level 10 learning outcomes. More specifically, it must evidence the learner's attainment of the learning outcomes required for the professional doctorate (**Section 5.2.3**). A professional doctorate thesis should be assessed using a similar process to that used for PhD theses—there should be a viva voce (see **Section 3.3**).

3 See NQAI *Review of Professional Doctorates* 2006 and Appendix 1.

An application for validation of a professional doctorate programme should be accompanied by a complete specification of the programme as required by QQI for programmes based on a prescribed course of study. The HET *General Programme Validation Manual* should be used as a guide for presenting the programme.

Finally, applications should be accompanied by information relating to the research environment (Section 3.4).

2.4.2 Special conditions attached to the validation of professional doctorate programmes

As with any programme, not all learners who begin a professional doctorate may prove capable of completing it. Learners' capacity for success should be re-assessed (by a process involving an independent expert assessor) after about a year of full-time equivalent work. This can be seen as the counterpart to the PhD transfer process. Learners who do not demonstrate the capacity to achieve the standard required for the professional doctorate and who might be able to progress to a master's degree should be facilitated in making the transfer.

3. General Criteria and Information Requirements for the Validation of Research Degree Programmes

Research approval and *research accreditation* are both processes for the validation of research degree programmes. The same criteria are used for approval and accreditation because research approval is to facilitate preparation for research accreditation. The main difference is that research accreditation affords more independence to the provider and requires evidence of a greater level of intrinsic research capacity in the discipline-area concerned.

In contrast to research accreditation, 'being research approved' is not designed to be a stationary state for providers. Research approved providers should be working towards meeting the criteria for research accreditation at some future time.

The criteria provided in Sections 3.1 and 3.3 should be used the first time a provider applies for research approval or research accreditation at a new NFQ level (or the first time it applies under this policy). They should also be used when a provider is preparing for *Institutional Review*.

The criteria in Section 3.2 should be used by all providers applying for research approval or research accreditation at a new NFQ level and/or in new discipline-areas.

Section 3.4 should be used as a guide for presenting information about the research degree programmes.

In essence, applications for validation will be based on the evidence found that a learner may attain knowledge, skill or competence for the purpose of an award. The criteria help guide the expert panel in making this judgement. The self-assessment report should present the evidence of strengths and areas for improvement relative to the validation criteria. The report should be coherent, candid, concise and clear. The report should include both quantitative and qualitative information. Over-reliance by the provider on the site-visit to provide clarifications may result in refusal of validation.

3.1 Institutional criteria

Providers should have quality assurance arrangements for the provision of research degree programmes which are consistent with the relevant guidelines (Section 5.4) and standards (Section 5.1-5.3) especially IUQB's *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Higher Education* and with the generic criteria in Section 3 of *HET Core Validation Policy and Criteria*.

3.2 Discipline-area Criteria

3.2.1 General

The provision and quality assurance of research degree programmes at discipline-area level should be consistent with the relevant guidelines and standards in Section 5 especially IUQB's *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Higher Education* and with the generic criteria in Section 3 of *HETCore Validation Policy and Criteria*.

The following headings from *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Higher Education* indicate the scope of this criterion.

- Institutional organisation
- Recruitment, admission and general arrangements
- Induction and communication
- Supervision and supervisor(s)
- The Student
- The Project
- Professional development
- Monitoring progress
- The Dissertation
- The Examination
- The Graduation
- Data records and reporting on PhD programmes

Minor, Special Purpose and Supplemental Awards

Where elements of structured research degree programmes lead to minor, special-purpose or supplemental awards those elements should also be validated (either for use in research degree programmes generally or as part of the research accreditation or research approval process for discipline-area-specific use).

- See *HET Core Validation Policy and Criteria* and *HET General Programme Validation Manual* for information about how to present such programmes.

Diploma Supplement

Providers of research degree programmes should issue a Diploma Supplement to each graduate.

- *A sample Diploma Supplement should be provided with the application.*

3.2.2 Research Context and Strategy

There should be a clearly documented, relevant and realistic research strategy for the discipline-area concerned.

- *This strategy should be consistent with and relevant to the provider's mission and the research strategy for the institution as a whole.*
- *It should also address the national and international context.*
- *Collaboration with other providers of research degree programmes and with industry should feature prominently in the strategy.*

The planned research should promise an appropriate scientific, social, economic or cultural impact which is consistent with the provider's mission.

3.2.3 Research Environment and Community

The provider should have an active, supportive academic environment and research community in the discipline-area demonstrated by recognised research performance indicators.

- *There should be evidence of the presence and active participation of people who can provide academic guidance, authority and leadership in the discipline-area concerned. They should be well connected with the broader research community in the discipline area. They should also be capable of managing the implementation of the discipline-area research strategy.*
- *There should be evidence of the presence and participation of sufficient staff who are capable of and have experience of supervising research students in the discipline-area at the appropriate NFQ level.*
- *There should be a sufficient volume of research activity to create a stimulating environment for research students.*
- *There should be evidence of co-operative behaviour and collegiality.*
- *There should 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.*

3.2.4 Research Facilities and Funding

There should be adequate physical resources as well as technical and administrative support structures and attendant staff appropriate to the research being undertaken.

There must be adequate informational resources to enable learners to read what other researchers are publishing in relevant discipline-areas.

Research degree programmes should be adequately funded.

3.2.5 Research Degree Programme Structure

The research degree programmes should be structured appropriately to enable the efficient attainment of the intended learning outcomes by the learner (see HET *Core Validation Policy and Criteria* and Section 5 below which describes the applicable *awards standards*).

- For each discipline-area the following should be available:
 - General and transferable skills training;
 - Specialised training required to develop a broad understanding of the relevant discipline-area and as dictated by the nature of the research being undertaken;
 - Seminars, both focused and interdisciplinary, to inform and to facilitate the dissemination and exchange of the fruits of research, enabling peer review and quality assessment.
- Ideally the elements above should be integrated into a structured research degree programme. The research apprenticeship is still an important part of a structured research degree programme and distinguishes it from taught programmes. This underlines the need for the presence of active researchers who can provide authoritative guidance and support and an active research community in the discipline-area concerned.
- Providers of research degree programmes should consult with other higher education institutions and with industry when developing their programmes.
- Research students should have access to appropriate career guidance and networking opportunities which should include options outside academia.
- PhD programmes in particular always involve the '*advancement of knowledge through original research*'⁴. They always involve the production of a thesis. The term thesis here should be understood inclusively to signify a coherent body of original work by the candidate. It consists of a (written) dissertation which may possibly be accompanied by a portfolio or supporting artefacts.
- Structured PhD programmes are becoming increasingly common in Ireland. The IUA definition of a 'structured PhD programme' is endorsed by QQI and is provided in Appendix 3 for information.

3.2.6 Research Productivity

The unit responsible for the discipline-area should be productive as evidenced by recognised research performance indicators⁵ (especially its recent publication record e.g. over the past five years).

- *The institution's claims about the quality of its research (regional, national, international recognition) should be justified by reliable evidence.*

4 IUA 'Contextual statement regarding structured PhD programmes' April 2009.

5 Input metrics (e.g. funding) are important but they are not research productivity indicators; they should be addressed under other criteria.

3.2.7 Duration of Research Degree Programmes

The duration of a PhD programme should normally be four years (fulltime equivalent) which may include time spent pursuing a Master's degree programme (or PhD probation) prior to transferring to the PhD register.

Industrial doctoral programmes where the research student is based in industry may require more time.

The duration of a Master's degree should normally be at least one-and-a-half years (fulltime equivalent) and may be no less than one calendar year.

3.3 Criteria for Procedures for the Assessment of Learning

The following criteria are used when agreeing a provider's procedures for the assessment of candidates for research degrees.

- The provider's formative and summative assessment procedures are consistent with:
 - *Assessment and Standards, Revised 2013* and
 - IUQB's *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Higher Education 2009* (particularly Chapters 8 and 10 both of which concern assessment).
- The transfer of a research student from the Master's Register to the Doctoral Register must involve a formal transfer process. The transfer process must involve the external review of the proposed research by an independent expert in the discipline-area concerned. Transfer is only possible within a provider if the provider has (at least) doctoral research approval in the discipline-area concerned.
- Each candidate for a research degree is assessed against the relevant standard in Section 5.2 below by at least two examiners after the thesis has been submitted.
- The provider has formal and robust procedures for selecting and approving external examiners which ensure that the examiners are independent, qualified to the NFQ level of the award sought by the candidate, recognised experts in the field and research-active. There should be procedures for the avoidance of all conflicts of interests (whether real or apparent or potential or actual) and declaration of relevant interests. External examiners for research degrees should be approved by the provider's Academic Committee or equivalent before being confirmed. If a nominated external examiner is not affiliated with a higher education institution then additional procedures are normally required to confirm that the nominee is competent to carry out the required functions. The procedures for selecting and approving internal examiners should be equally robust.
 - Examiners are selected on a case-by-case basis for each thesis submitted.
 - At least one examiner should always be external to the provider. The external examiner is independent of the candidate and the provider and is a recognised research-active expert in the thesis topic⁶.

6 Note that HET *Effective Practice Guidelines for External Examining 2009* addresses external examining of taught programmes and not external examination of research (including professional doctorate) theses. Professional doctorate programmes and research degree programmes should use external examining to quality assure assessment of prescribed courses of study and the effective practice guidelines apply to this function.

- One examiner may be a member of the provider's staff except where the learner concerned is also a member of the provider's staff. The internal examiner is otherwise independent of the candidate and supervisory team. Providers which do not have the scale required to provide a suitable internal examiner rely upon external examiners (i.e. they appoint two or more).
- The supervisor and all members of any supervisory team are ineligible to be examiners in the assessment of any learner supervised.
- The provider's assessment procedures should detail the internal and external examiner's roles and responsibilities. The examiners' task is to assess the *candidate* against the relevant award standard using the thesis as evidence. See Section 5 on the precise criteria for recommending the award of research degrees.
- Structured PhD programmes may include taught elements which are assessed. Such assessments are enabling assessments (to determine whether or not a learner may submit a thesis) rather than assessments that have a bearing on the PhD result which must hinge on the thesis and the performance of the candidate at the *viva voce*.
- The assessment process is transparent. 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 candidate in the case of a Master's degree.
- The assessment procedures (for both Master's and Doctoral degrees) provide for the engagement by the provider of a non-voting chairperson who is independent of the candidate and supervisory team. The role and responsibilities of the chairperson should be made explicit in the provider's procedures and should include (see also the special condition on the nomination of the chairperson for research approved providers in Section 2.2.2):
 - Communicating with the examiners to achieve consensus among them;
 - Ensuring that the process and assessment criteria are properly applied; and
 - Reporting to QQI where it is the awarding body.
- There should be a procedure which 'can be implemented in case of examiner disagreement as to the' assessment outcome (see Chapter 10 of the aforementioned IUQB Code).
- Where required, the chairperson should send his or her report to QQI as soon as possible after the assessment. The report should include a brief outline of the learning outcome, the names of each of the examiners along with an outline of the assessment (the reports of the examiners may be attached) and a report of the consensus recommendation. The acceptable (for the purpose of consistency) recommendations are:
 - Recommended;
 - Recommended with minor revisions;
 - Not recommended but referred for major revision and re-examination; and
 - Not recommended.
- The procedures state clearly that the option to refer the thesis for revision is normally only available the first time the thesis is examined.

3.4 Information Requirements for Validation

The following information should be provided along with the critical self-assessment:

- (1) Institutional research strategy
- (2) Discipline-area research strategy
- (3) Description of research degree programmes (e.g. curricula and assessment, see HET *Core Validation Policy and Criteria*) including details of any embedded minor award programmes
- (4) Research outputs⁷ by category (patents, peer-reviewed journal papers, peer-reviewed conference papers, books, etc.) and trends
- (5) Research inputs (major items of equipment, research funding, facilities, etc.) and trends
- (6) Research information (library journal holdings, literature databases, etc.)
- (7) Research collaborations (consortium agreements (or equivalent) for formal collaborations; informal collaborations)
- (8) Research staff (Curricula vitae⁸ of research active staff who may supervise research students)
- (9) List of theses approved for higher degrees (copies to be available at site visit)
- (10) List of current research projects
- (11) Policy and Procedures for Research Degree Programmes
- (12) Handbooks for research students

Demonstrations of research activity (e.g. poster presentations by staff and students) should be arranged for the site visit by the expert panel.

⁷ When presenting a research product it is important to indicate its standing. Where material is being published in well known peer reviewed journals it is sufficient to cite the references. In areas where the channels for the dissemination of research are more varied, more information will be required to help distinguish internationally recognised advances from those of national significance only.

⁸ This should contain appropriate information about his or her qualifications and research-relevant experience and performance (e.g. lists of research publications, patents, exhibitions, etc.).

4. Delegation of Authority to Award Research Degrees

4.1 General procedures and criteria

Authority to make awards will be delegated to *recognised institutions* in accordance with the HET document entitled “*Criteria and Procedures for the Delegation and Review of Delegation of Authority to Make Awards*” (2004) supplemented and qualified by the criteria and procedures set out below. *Research accreditation* is a pre-requisite for delegated authority to award research degrees. Delegation of authority to award research degrees is therefore by discipline-area and by NFQ-level.

Institutions seeking delegated authority must apply to QQI. The application should be accompanied by a self-evaluation report prepared in accordance with “*Criteria and Procedures for the Delegation and Review of Delegation of Authority to Make Awards*”.

QQI will review such applications in accordance with the *Criteria and Procedures for the Delegation and Review of Delegation of Authority to Make Awards*. Where an institution has already received limited delegated authority to make awards this review will normally only address the extension of delegated authority.

If the institution has already delegated authority to award research degrees at the relevant NFQ level then extension of delegated authority following research accreditation in a new discipline-area at the same NFQ level will not normally require the submission of a self-evaluation. In such cases QQI may extend delegated authority to comprehend the new discipline-area.

4.2 Delegation of Authority to Award Master’s Degrees

A recognised institution with *research accreditation* in a discipline-area at NFQ Level 9 may apply for delegated authority to award masters degrees in that discipline-area.

Institutions which have independently gained delegated authority to award masters degrees in respect of research degree programmes in two or more discipline-areas, may apply for extension of delegated authority at NFQ Level 9 to all approved or accredited areas in the institution provided the institution has established an institutional strategy for research and a validation process to replace QQI’s research approval/accreditation process and subject to QQI satisfying itself of all of this by a formal review and agreeing the extension of delegation with the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. Such an application should be accompanied by a self-evaluation prepared in accordance with “*Criteria and Procedures for the Delegation and Review of Delegation of Authority to Make Awards*”.

4.3 Delegation of Authority to Award PhDs

A recognised institution with accreditation in a discipline-area at NFQ Level 10 may apply for delegated authority to award PhD degrees in that discipline-area.

4.4 Delegation of Authority to Award Professional Doctorates

Recognised institutions of the Council may apply to QQI for delegated authority to validate professional doctorate programmes and make professional doctorate awards in a specified discipline-area.

Authority to award professional doctorates will be delegated on a discipline-area basis consistent with policy for delegation of authority to award Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degrees.

Before authority is delegated in the first instance to a recognised institution of the Council to make professional doctorate awards in a particular discipline-area, the institution should develop and document:

- (i) a professional doctorate programme in the discipline-area;
- (ii) validation process and criteria for professional doctorate programmes; and
- (iii) quality assurance procedures for the professional doctorate programmes.

The institution should trial its validation process on the planned programme (as if it had validating authority) and then submit the programme documentation, the report of the pseudo-validation process, along with the other documentation referenced above to QQI for validation. The institution should also include a self-evaluation in support of its application for delegated authority prepared in accordance with Section 4.1.

4.4.1 Conditions

A necessary condition for a recognised institution of the Council to make awards under delegated authority in respect of professional doctorate programmes is that QQI has explicitly delegated authority specifying the discipline-area. If an institution of the council validates additional programmes within the scope of such delegated authority it should inform QQI, which will issue formal delegated authority for that particular programme as is the practice generally.

QQI requires, *inter alia*, that any institution of the Council with delegated authority to make awards in respect of professional doctorate programmes, ensures that those programmes are validated (and re-validated) in accordance with its '*Research Degree Programme Validation Policy and Criteria*'.

5. Awards Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Research Degree Programmes

5.1 Access Standards

5.1.1 Master's Degree by Research

The knowledge, skill and competence required for the successful completion of a typical master's level research degree programme might, for example, reasonably be expected to be possessed by

1. Persons who have achieved an Honours Bachelor Degree with a performance equivalent of at least second class honours (which is a major award type at Level 8 in NFQ.) The Bachelor's qualification must be in a field of study directly related to the subject matter of the Master's Degree
2. Persons who hold recognised academic qualifications determined to be at least equivalent to the requirement indicated in the preceding paragraph
3. Persons with a recognised professional qualification (which requires professional experience and work achievement) and which testifies to the possession of the required knowledge, skill and competence
4. Persons who have demonstrated the required knowledge, skill and competence by passing a qualifying examination conducted by an approved or accredited provider.

5.1.2 Doctor of Philosophy Degree

Applicants to doctoral research degree programmes are required to complete a probationary period before their registration is confirmed.

The knowledge, skill and competence required for the successful completion of a typical PhD level research degree programme might, for example, reasonably be expected to be possessed by

1. Persons who have achieved an Honours Bachelor Degree with a performance equivalent of at least second class upper division honours (which is a major award type at Level 8 in NFQ.) The Bachelor's qualification must be in a field of study directly related to the subject matter of the Master's Degree
2. Persons who have set out on a Master's research programme and successfully completed a transfer examination
3. Persons holding a Masters degree in a cognate area
4. Persons who hold recognised academic qualifications determined to be at least equivalent to the requirements indicated by the preceding paragraphs
5. Persons with a recognised professional qualification (which requires a high level of professional experience and work achievement) and which testifies to the possession of the required knowledge, skill and competence
6. Persons who have demonstrated the required knowledge, skill and competence by passing a qualifying examination conducted by an approved or accredited provider.

5.2 Awards Standards

The standards require that learners not only develop cutting-edge knowledge in their chosen discipline-area but also achieve a broad understanding of the relevant discipline and develop transferable skills.

5.2.1 Master's Degree by Research—Standard

The standard (of knowledge, skill and competence to be acquired) for the Master's degree by research is the HET *Generic Standards for the Master's Degree* (NFQ Award-type descriptor 'M').

QQI has also adopted the *Irish Universities' PhD Graduates' Skills* statement and this should be used as a guideline for interpreting the standard particularly as regards transferable skills.

5.2.2 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').

QQI has also adopted the *Irish Universities' PhD Graduates' Skills* statement and this should be used as a guideline for interpreting the standard particularly as regards transferable skills.

The standard for the doctoral degree (NFQ Award-type descriptor 'O') requires breadth as well as depth of knowledge and skills and, among other things, '*the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers*'. This contribution to knowledge of a publishable (in a peer reviewed research publication) standard must be evident in the candidate's thesis. This implies that there is an expectation that each learner completing a doctoral programme will (at some stage) generate significant peer-reviewed product from their research (such as publications, patents etc.).

The above is consistent with the IUQB's *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Higher Education* which states that (Chapter 10, p.47):

'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, and*
- *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.'

Finally it is consistent with the following: 'Additionally, the candidate 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 work.'⁹

5.2.3 Professional Doctorate Degree Standard

The generic standard for the professional doctorate shall be the National Framework of Qualifications Award-type descriptor 'O'- Doctoral Degree.

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.

5.3 Award Titles

5.3.1 Masters Degrees by Research

All new entrants to master's research degree programmes following commencement of this policy shall be registered for the Masters Degree by Research. The title of the award should be appropriate to the thesis research area. The list of available award titles is provided by the Table of HET Named Awards which is available on QQI's website.

5.3.2 Doctoral Degrees by Research

All new entrants to doctoral research degree programmes shall be registered for the **Doctor of Philosophy** (PhD) degree.

5.3.3 Professional Doctorate Award Titles

Professional doctorate award titles shall take the form Doctor of [Professional Discipline] /*Dochtúir le [Léann Gairmiúil]*. Examples that might arise include *Doctor of Business Administration* and *Doctor of Engineering*.

The award title Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) may not under any circumstances be used for professional doctorate degrees nor incorporated into professional doctorate programme titles.

9 From a response by the IUA Deans of Graduate Studies to an earlier draft of this policy April 2010.

5.4 Guidelines

Providers of research degree programmes are referred to the following documents which shall serve as QQI standards and guidelines:

- Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (*published by ENQA, 2005*)
- Salzburg Principles (*published by EUA, 2005*)
- Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Higher Education (*published by IUQB, 2009*)
- Good Practice in the Quality Assurance of Arts Research Degree Programmes by Practice (*published by HETAC, 2010*)
- European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers (*published by the European Commission, 2005*)
- Funding Agency Requirements and Guidelines for Managing Research-Generated Intellectual Property (*published by SFI, 2006*)

The first two are general. The second specifically addresses PhD programmes but can and should be used to guide good practice in the provision of masters' research degree programmes.

6. Interpretation

Discipline-area	A discipline-area for the purpose of this policy is a label that indicates the scope of research programmes to be provided by the relevant unit. A unit could be a research group or academic department or a collaborative research network. The unit's research strategy should detail how and why the discipline-area is to be researched and by whom. The term discipline-area can be relatively narrow e.g. 'Smooth Muscle Research' or broad e.g. 'Physics Research'. Broad terms should only be used where supported by an appropriate breadth of research activity.
Core Validation Policy and Criteria	The core policy and criteria for validation which apply to all validation by QQI or by recognised institutions. See HET Core Validation Policy and Criteria.
Institutional Review	See HETAC's <i>Policy on Institutional Review of Providers of Higher Education and Training 2007</i>
Recognised Institution	The institutions specified in Section 24 of the Qualifications (Education and Training) Act 1999.
Research degree programme	A research degree programme is a process by which learners develop and demonstrate research skills and attain specified learning outcomes mainly through research but also through taught elements.

7. Template for self-evaluation of research degree programmes by discipline-area

This template is designed to provide summary information to QQI following programmatic review of research degree programmes. Alone it is not sufficiently detailed for research accreditation or research approval at new levels or in new areas.

Report on the self-assessment of research degree programmes in a discipline-area or group of cognate discipline-areas					
Period covered:					
Discipline-areas:					
Discipline-area Title(s) ¹⁰	Label (A, B, C,...)	Highest level of current approval (Master or Doctor)	Research Fields covered by the Discipline-area ¹¹	Does this area have the critical mass required for high quality research environment? (Yes/No)	Research income (€)

List of academic staff who are available to supervise students							
Name	Highest academic qualification	Specific Field of Science Code(s) (OECD 2007) ¹² for Individual	Research output level ¹³	Research leadership ¹⁴	Discipline-area (use the labels assigned above)	Number of students supervised to completion in this period	
						Master-level	Doctoral

10 These must be cognate areas. Non-cognate areas should be covered by separate self-assessments.

11 Please indicate which OECD 2007 Field of Science code(codes) applies(apply):<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/36/44/38235147.pdf>

12 OECD 2007 Field of Science code(codes) applies(apply): <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/36/44/38235147.pdf>)

13 Research output level:- use the code 1, 2 or 3 defined as follows:

1. Has published (or had patents accepted or has had their research otherwise affirmed/accepted by an equivalent documented independent peer review process etc.) virtually every year in the period under consideration.
2. Has published occasionally in the period under consideration.
3. Has not published in the period under consideration

14 Research leadership:- use the code 1, 2 or 3 defined as follows:

1. Internationally recognised leader (e.g. as evidenced, for example, by papers regularly being published in the top peer reviewed journals)
2. Nationally recognised leader
3. Other

List of theses approved for higher degrees in the past 10 years					
Thesis title	Degree	Date	External examiner(s) name(s)	External examiner(s) affiliation(s)	Has any part of the work been published in peer reviewed forum or patented (Yes/No)

Completion times and rates		
	PhD	Master's degree
Average completion time ¹⁵ in the period under consideration		
Average completion rate ¹⁶ in the period under consideration		

Courses available for research students			
Course title	Course provider	Number of ECTS credits	Indicate whether specialised or general

Research collaborations with other higher education institutions		
HEI name	Type of collaboration- formal or informal (including co-supervision)	Objectives of collaboration

¹⁵ The completion time is the time between admission of the student by the institution to the research degree programme and acceptance of the final thesis (whether or not recommended).

¹⁶ Percentage of candidates who were registered (at or before the start of the period under consideration) and who completed successfully or are still registered and expected to complete successfully.

What are the strengths and what are the areas for improvement in research in these discipline-areas?
What are the improvement specific actions that have been identified?

List strengths and areas for improvement under each of the validation criteria (Section 3 of QQI's Research Degree Programme Policy and Criteria) considering the validation report or the most recent review report. This section is the most important part of the self-evaluation. The emphasis should be on quality enhancement as well as on quality assurance.

Brief outline of the self-assessment process

Names and affiliations of the self-assessment review panel members¹⁷

Name	Affiliation

¹⁷ The panel should include independent experts in research in the discipline-areas.

8. References

ENQA *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* 2005

European Commission *European Charter for Researchers and Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers* 2005¹⁸

European University Association *Bologna Seminar On “Doctoral Programmes for The European Knowledge Society” Conclusions and Recommendations* (includes the Salzburg Principles) 2005

European University Association *Doctoral Programmes for the European Knowledge Society* 2005

European University Association *Doctoral Programmes in Europe’s Universities: Achievements and Challenges* 2007

European University Association *EUA DOC-CAREERS Report: Collaborative Doctoral Education* 2009

Forfas *The Role of PhDs in the Smart Economy* December 2009

George Walker, Chris M. Golde, Laura Jones, Andrea Conklin Bueschel, Pat Hutchings. *The Formation of Scholars: Rethinking Doctoral Education for the Twenty-First Century* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass ISBN: 978-0-470-19743-1 January 2008

HETAC *Generic Standards* 2004

Working Group on Practice-based Research in the Arts, Good Practice in the Quality Assurance of Arts Research Degree Programmes by Practice 2010

HETAC *Policy on Institutional Review of Providers of Higher Education and Training* 2007

HETAC *Participating in an evaluation panel as an expert assessor: Guidelines* 2009

IUA *Irish Universities’ PhD Graduates’ Skills* 2008

IUQB *Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Higher Education* 2009;

SFI *Funding Agency Requirements and Guidelines for Managing Research-Generated Intellectual Property* 2006¹⁹

18 http://ec.europa.eu/eracareers/pdf/am509774CEE_EN_E4.pdf (retrieved 06/01/2010)

19 http://www.sfi.ie/uploads/documents/upload/IPGuidelines-FINAL_Feb06.pdf (retrieved 06/01/2010)

Appendix 1 Professional Doctorates

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.’²⁰

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 policy.

The Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) award title is normally restricted to learners who follow an original research degree programme resulting in the production of a thesis demonstrating learning outcomes of the required standard. Professional doctorates are normally more highly structured than PhD programmes, may involve a substantial taught element, and are normally cohort-based but there is still a requirement for original research. They may also differ in terms of the learner’s product, the assessment methods and the objectives of the research.

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)²¹ 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.

A professional doctorate programme is a programme leading to a professional doctorate.

20 Stuart Powell and Elizabeth Long, (2005) *Professional Doctorate Awards in the UK*, UK Council for Graduate Education, ISBN 0-9543915-4-3
21 D. Scott, A. Brown, I. Lunt and L. Thorne (2004) *Professional Doctorates: Integrating Professional and Academic Knowledge*, Open University Press as reported in National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2006) *Review of Professional Doctorates*. Note the reference to the UK Council for Graduate Education (2004) *Professional Doctorate Awards in the UK*

Appendix 2 Case-by-case Procedures

This appendix outlines the procedures for meeting the special conditions of Section 2.2.2. The procedures are similar to those which operated under the previous policies.

Before a new research student is registered (or transferred to the doctoral register) in a research approved discipline area the provider must apply to QQI for its agreement that the student be registered. The provider should develop an application form for this purpose and a template for this is available from QQI. The form should provide information about:

- (1) The student
- (2) The proposed research project
- (3) The supervisory arrangements

The application should be accompanied by a report of an external independent expert review of the research project.

Appendix 3 IUA Definition of a Structured PhD Programme

The (April 2009) IUA definition is provided here (with permission) for reference.

'The following are key characteristics of a structured PhD programme in Irish Universities. Such programmes may involve inter-institutional collaboration.'

- (a) *The core component of a structured PhD programme is the advancement of knowledge through original research; at the same time the structured PhD is designed to meet the needs of an employment market that is wider than academia;*
- (b) *A high quality research experience, training and output consistent with international norms and best practice;*
- (c) *To support the original research activity, the following elements are included:*
 - *a formalised integrated programme of education, training and personal and professional development activities*
 - *the development of discipline-specific knowledge, research skills and generic / transferable skills*
 - *declared outcomes and graduate attributes in line with national and international best practice*
- (d) *Supervision by a principal supervisor(s), normally with a supporting panel approved by the institution;*
- (e) *Progress to completion is formally monitored against published criteria and supported by formal institutional arrangements in line with national and international best practice;*
- (f) *Successful completion and examination of the research thesis is the basis for the award of the PhD degree;*
- (g) *Registration is normally for four years for a full-time student.'*