

IRISH UNIVERSITIES  
QUALITY BOARD

# Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Universities

A series of booklets produced by  
the Irish Universities Quality Board

1

National  
Guidelines

## **Sectoral Projects**

This booklet is one of a series produced by the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). The aim of the series is to establish and publish good practice for Irish universities in the key areas of Teaching and Learning, Research and Strategic Planning/Management. This is in keeping with the IUQB aim to increase the level of inter-university co-operation in developing quality assurance processes. The booklets are the result of inter-university projects on topics selected, organised and driven by the Board with the close collaboration of the universities, and funded by the Higher Education Authority and the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities. The selection of the projects is based on recommendations for improvement contained in the reviews of departments and faculties required by the Universities Act 1997.

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# Preface

*"Doctoral education is one of the most distinctive and important activities of the contemporary research university"*

Frank H.T. Rhodes,  
former President of Cornell University

It has been said that the main purpose of undertaking a PhD programme is "to carry out a scholarly activity involving original thought, perhaps novelty, and in-depth critical analysis", This purpose should be restated regularly, so that it is clearly understood by all concerned. These guidelines are intended to support and help in the achievement of this purpose.

The creation of the European Research Area is central to the Bologna Process. Clearly an integral part of this development is the improvement of the organisation of PhD programmes and all that this entails. While these guidelines are situated in the Irish context, they reflect evolving ideas here and in our partner countries across Europe.



# Introduction

## Background to the Project

In recent years several factors have increased the importance of high standards and consistent practice in PhD programmes, and of mechanisms to ensure standards and quality.


- A The ever-increasing emphasis placed on research as a driver of economic and social development, and improved government funding, have resulted in marked increases in the numbers of postgraduate research students in all Irish universities. The number of such students rose from just over 5000 in 2001 to 6000 in 2003<sup>1</sup>. In 2003 alone, over 600 students graduated with PhD degrees from the seven Irish universities<sup>2</sup>. This underlines the importance of detailed policies, regulations and guidelines, and the improvement of supports of all kinds, for research students and their supervisors.
- B A greater proportion of PhD graduates are entering business and administration. Also, careers in research and higher education are now seen as requiring, for doctoral graduates, the acquisition of a broad range of general and specific skills. As a consequence, there are increasing calls for explicit training provisions for research students leading to more formalised preparation for their future careers.
- C The measures proposed in these Guidelines are already well established in other countries<sup>3</sup>.

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1 Interim Report on Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Universities, [www.iuqb.ie/PhDInterimReport.pdf](http://www.iuqb.ie/PhDInterimReport.pdf)

2 *ibid.*

3 [www.qaa.ac.uk/public/COP/cop/contents.htm](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/COP/cop/contents.htm) Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education: Postgraduate research programmes. (UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education)



D In the Berlin Communiqué<sup>4</sup>, the relevant government ministers included doctoral studies as the third cycle in the Bologna process. This emphasised the importance of research and research training in maintaining and improving the quality of higher education and in enhancing the competitiveness of European higher education.

The provision of the additional activities referred to in B above will increase the cost and length of PhD programmes and this must be borne in mind by the funding bodies and by the universities. Measures equivalent to those provided for in the recent 'Training Site Awards'<sup>5</sup> made through the Health Research Board (HRB) may be necessary for all postgraduate research students.

## **Project outline**

### **Aim:**

To improve the organisation and efficiency of PhD programmes in all Irish universities including administrative arrangements, development of research related-skills and project supervision.

### **Objectives:**

- 1 To establish current practice, nationally and internationally
- 2 To establish good practices
- 3 To prepare a national code of good practice

## **Activities**

### **Workshops**

Each university held a workshop to facilitate inputs to this Project from its staff and relevant officers, and the resulting reports were collated and distributed.

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4 Berlin Communiqué (September 2003).  
[www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main\\_doc/030919Berlin\\_Communique.PDF](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/030919Berlin_Communique.PDF)

5 HRB Training site awards: [www.hrb.ie/view\\_categories.php?cat\\_id=312](http://www.hrb.ie/view_categories.php?cat_id=312)



### **The Interim Report**

As a major input to the Experts Conference (see below), an Interim Report was prepared. This 81 page, comprehensive Report<sup>6</sup>, brought together much data and information never before correlated and provides a concise but detailed overview of current postgraduate research training in the Irish universities.

### **Experts Conference**

A national conference with international speakers entitled 'Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes' was held in Dublin in April 2004. There were presentations on practices in four countries (Sweden, France, the USA and the UK), breakout sessions and a plenary discussion.

### **The Consultation Process**

Following the presentation of a draft copy to the Minister for Education and Science at the "Strength and Numbers" Conference Meeting on Postgraduate research training organised by the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities (CHIU) in 2004, the Guidelines were modified with the benefit of feedback from three sources:

- a A focus group of postgraduate research students with representatives from all seven universities.
- b A series of eminent researchers in the sciences and humanities working in Ireland and abroad, with extensive international experience, who were invited to provide input.
- c Interested persons from the universities and other organisations who obtained copies of the draft guidelines at the CHIU conference or downloaded it from the IUQB website.

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6 See footnote one.



## **Acknowledgements**

This project was supported by the Quality Assurance Programme, organised by the HEA and supported under the National Development Plan 2000–06. In addition, after formal applications were submitted, additional financial support for the project was obtained from the Irish Research Council for Science Engineering and Technology (the Embark initiative) and from the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

## **Using these Guidelines**

### **Purpose**

The purpose of these Guidelines is to facilitate the revision and greater standardisation of policies, regulations, procedures and documentation governing the Organisation of PhD Programmes in Irish Universities. The intention is that each university will see this document as containing agreed statements of good practice that they must take into consideration so as to improve their own relevant systems.

### **The Sections**

Each guideline section starts with some paragraphs that outline the main relevant issues and refer to points raised during the workshops held at the seven universities, to practices in other countries cited at the Experts' Meeting of April 2004, and to relevant publications. The purpose of these subsections is to place in context the specific guideline items that appear on odd-numbered pages.

Each guideline item is in the form of a non-prescriptive statement that represents a 'good practice'. In most cases there are many ways in which a particular 'good practice' may be achieved and it is recognised that diversity in this respect may exist. However, every university should accept that any policy, regulation or procedure that is ineffective in achieving or maintaining a 'good practice' is changed or replaced as soon as is practicable. Procedures in each university for identifying and rectifying such 'deficiencies' are essential.

The interests of research students are served best when relevant general regulations and procedures (including those relating to 'Institutional organisation',

'Preliminary arrangements', and 'The Supervisor[s]') have been properly considered and enacted well in advance of the student being registered. Therefore, these issues are considered in advance of those relating directly to 'The Student' which are dealt with in Section 4.



# The Guidelines

Policies, regulations and guidelines should arise from well-considered aims and objectives and should be informed by reflection on practice and experience. With respect to the education of research students to the doctoral level, such aims and objectives may be directly or indirectly related to matters such as:

- The development and maintenance of the highest international standards of scholarship, research and, as appropriate, creativity.
- The broad educational, cultural and physical development and well being of the students.
- Equality and fairness, with provisions for persons with special needs.
- The fostering of a culture of inquisitiveness (or curiosity), creativity innovation, scholarship and research in the students' environment.
- Compatibility with the distinctive aspects of the missions of the relevant departments, schools, faculties, institutes, centres and universities.

# 1 Institutional organisation

## Bodies and Officers

Traditionally, the 'registrar' and the general admissions and examinations services took care of all central administrative functions and decisions with respect to PhD programmes, and supported the faculty, department, supervisor and PhD student. Written regulations were brief and practices and decisions were usually informed by the prior experiences of the staff. Inputs from external examiners were always important. Decisions were ratified at meetings of the relevant faculty and by academic council. The number of research students was small, so any one officer or official devoted only a fraction of her/his time to 'PhD matters'. While research and scholarship were valued, central administration had little directly to do with them.

Much has happened in recent years and a survey of the seven universities today would reveal a wide variety of additional structures, officers and groups who deal with postgraduate research students and/or matters directly relating to them, such as:

- *Graduate Studies Office, and Dean* with administrative and regulatory functions to deal with taught and research post-graduate degree programmes
- *Research Office, and Vice President or Dean* which drives the research enterprise of the university
- *Graduate Schools* with functions in recruitment, monitoring of student progress, and the organisation and provision of training related to professional development
- *Faculty Research Committees* dealing with matters relevant to research students
- *Faculty/Departmental/ Postgraduate Committees* with proactive roles with respect to postgraduate research
- *Research Institutes, Centres and Groups* that take initiatives in support of research supervision and of generic training.

However and in general, structures, procedures and practices are in transition and further developments are needed in many cases.

In one of the preliminary workshops there was a proposal for the creation of an institutional 'one-stop shop' that would encompass all the needs of the research student, and would liaise with the relevant bodies in the university. Separately, it was proposed that one dedicated university 'postgraduate officer' should have responsibility for the postgraduate research sector and monitor admissions and the progression of students, etc.

The insights gained at the 'Experts Conference' into the practices of universities in other countries (as well as the structures already in place in some Irish universities) make clear that there may be a universal necessity for a designated member of academic staff to take overall responsibility for 'research education' in each faculty, or large department, or other unit of sufficient size.

Finally, direct representation of research students on all relevant committees may be essential to ensure effective decision-making. Research student representatives who undertake substantial commitments of this kind should have this recognised by the university in the estimation of their total duties.

# 1 Institutional organisation

## **Guidelines – Bodies and Officers**

- Institutional structures in support of PhD programmes cover all sectors of the university, are effective and are suited to planned expansion and developments.
- There is a university officer with overall responsibility for PhD programmes.
- Each relevant body and officer has defined terms of reference or a job description covering all aspects of their roles with respect to PhD programmes. All levels are taken into account:
  - University,
  - Faculty, and as appropriate
  - Department, school, institute, centre
- Research students are represented on all committees and other groups with direct relevance to postgraduate research programmes.
- Procedures are in place for the assurance of standards and quality with respect to all PhD programmes, including:
  - Periodic reviews that focus on one aspect or another of PhD programmes.
  - Periodic satisfaction surveys of research students.
  - An exit survey of every graduating research student.
  - The compilation and publication of completion times and rates, and other general data that can be broken down to show performance by any relevant academic unit.

## 2 Preliminary arrangements

‘Preliminary arrangements’ refers to all procedures and documentation that are completed, in place or operational before a research student is recruited and registered. These include the core procedures relating to admission, registration, thesis submission and examination, but also other elements that can contribute to what is considered internationally to be good practice.

### Procedures

Efficient administration needs to be supported by written procedures and simple forms that clarify, simplify and facilitate the multiple steps and stages of a student’s progress from applicant to graduate. The administration of research students is in particular need of such supports because every student must be treated individually at all stages.

Given the understandable concern of many of the stakeholders in postgraduate research, not least the research funding councils and boards, completion times and completion rates are assuming greater importance. Guidelines in UK universities already remind students and supervisors that a completion time longer than four years will “adversely affect the Department’s Research Rating which in turn affects funding and future studentships”.

Therefore, agreed differential definitions of target times and completion times for students in different circumstances are important. ‘Less than full-time’ students may work under a wide range of constraints, making a single definition of ‘part-time’ inappropriate for some. The circumstances of a student may also change, leading to him/her being unable to continue to work for a significant length of time.

### Documentation

The need for adequate documentation pertaining to all areas of the organisation of PhD programmes was an issue that arose in quality reviews and at the workshops connected with this project in all universities. Basic information is available with regard to admissions, registration and the examination processes. However beyond this, the situation varies between universities.

Internationally, comprehensive documentation for students and supervisors is common. (For examples see [www.gradstudies.unimelb.edu.au/pgstudy/phd/handbk/](http://www.gradstudies.unimelb.edu.au/pgstudy/phd/handbk/) or [www.brad.ac.uk/admin/student-registry/Guidance/index.htm](http://www.brad.ac.uk/admin/student-registry/Guidance/index.htm)). It is interesting to note that the issues covered in such documentation mirror the issues raised at the preliminary workshops.

At the workshops also, several recommendations were made for the development of comprehensive codes of practice/conduct for supervisors and for students that explain their rights and responsibilities. It was also felt that the roles and responsibilities of the department, the faculty and the university should be defined formally. These would ensure transparency in relation to the expectations and the duties of all parties in the PhD programme. However, they should not be overly detailed and prescriptive, and should allow for necessary local and discipline-related variations in practices.



## 2 Preliminary arrangements

### **Guidelines – Procedures**

- There is a written administrative operational procedure for each major step in a research student's progress from application, to the offer of a position, to graduation. All procedures provide for good notice being given to students, supervisors etc. at all stages.
- There are clear, concise and easily completed forms that facilitate the student, the supervisor and administrators at each major stage. All of these forms are available in softcopy on the university website, and are widely publicised.
- There are clear definitions that differentiate between full-time and less than full-time students and there is a specific timetable with respect to expected completion time etc. for each category.
- "Time out" for periods longer than a set minimum, that are associated with long term sickness, compassionate leave and other defined circumstances, can be granted to a student who makes a formal application which is supported by his/her supervisor/supervisory team'.

### **Guidelines – Documentation**

- There are clear and logical regulations governing minimum and maximum completions times and re-admission procedures.
- For supervisors and students there are simple and well-designed forms and written formal procedures that clarify and simplify all important stages of the PhD programme, and allow for reasonable flexibility and intra-disciplinary variations.
- There is a comprehensive, flexible, and widely used 'Code of practice/Guidelines' booklet that ensures transparency in relation to the expectations and the duties of all parties in the PhD programme and covers all matters relevant to research students, supervisors, university officers and examiners. Matters included should cover the full range of main issues relevant to research students, among which are:
  - The realities of a life of research and scholarship.
  - Conventions regarding single authorship, priorities in jointly-authored published work and the acknowledgement of contributions.
  - Issues related to ethics and intellectual property.
  - General advice on career prospects for research graduates.
- All basic documentation is routinely and readily available in (a) printed booklet(s) and on the university website.

### 3 The Supervisor(s)

First and foremost, postgraduate research supervisors should be active scholars and researchers with good records of achievement and publication. Existing regulations defining suitability insist that PhD supervisors themselves have a PhD in a suitable academic area or an equivalent record of achievement. In most academic disciplines recruitment procedures and competition ensure that such minimum standards are exceeded for all permanent academic staff. However, a universal practice or a general regulation that ensures that students are supervised only by researchers who are active and successful in the appropriate areas is advisable.

In many respects, a PhD studentship is not unlike an apprenticeship, with a supervisor imparting understanding and insights, and advising the student as s/he undertakes the long process of mastering concepts, bodies of knowledge and methodologies, undertakes original research and expands the limits of achievement and knowledge. In many disciplines this model has changed little over decades, except for the expectations of society, funding bodies and many students. In others, including the sciences of all varieties, research has become much more complex and any research project may depend on a range of external inputs. For example, specialist members of a research team may carry out all procedures or analyses of a certain type, thereby contributing to many PhD projects.

#### Training and Support

Recommendations for the provision of training and supports for supervisors are to be found in academic department quality review reports in the seven universities. There was also broad support for such measures at the preliminary workshops. Some universities already provide some training on research degree supervision to new academic appointees and to volunteers. Individual recommendations ranged from:

- Mentoring workshops to allow new supervisors the opportunity to discuss issues and gain advice from more experienced staff; to
- Compulsory training for new inexperienced staff; to
- All primary supervisors of PhD students taking an induction course to ensure their understanding of their responsibilities and what high quality supervision may entail; to
- Support and training for more experienced supervisors, if required.

The proposed methods of providing this training included the provision of a structured training programme, a mentoring system using experienced members of staff or a requirement that first-time supervisors initially operate as part of a supervisory team. In the countries represented at the 'Experts Conference', training supports for research supervisors are common practice, and are now being introduced in Irish universities as part of professional development programmes.

Whilst a fixed cap on the number of research students per supervisor has serious limitations, universities should seek to avoid the difficulties associated with supervisors having too many students. Student to supervisor ratios (calculated from full time equivalent [FTE] students and supervisors) for all supervisors should be available to all concerned. The variations that exist between discipline/departments; the availability of resources; the availability of postdoctoral fellows and technicians who can contribute effectively; and the experience and track record of the supervisor should be taken into account also. Finally, the total workload of a staff member should also be considered.

Of fundamental importance: every student must have one supervisor (the principal supervisor) who is a member of staff of the university, who takes full responsibility for the overall management and supervision of the student's work and progress. The roles of associate or co-supervisors will depend on their expertise, location etc.

## 3 The Supervisor(s)

### **Guidelines – Training and Support**

- Every student has one supervisor (the primary supervisor), who is a member of staff of the university and an active and successful scholar in the relevant area, who takes full responsibility for the overall management and supervision of the student's training and research project, for the monitoring of progress and for administrative matters.
- There are defined criteria on the suitability of persons in the university as primary supervisors of PhD students.
- Adequate training and other provisions are available to enhance and support student supervision and project management. They are obligatory for first-time supervisors.
- There is a procedure that ensures that a primary supervisor is capable of taking on a proposed number of new students. This procedure takes into consideration the experience and reputation of the supervisor, the composition of his/her research group (number of research students and the stage of their training, number of postdoctoral workers and number of support staff), and the support available from co-supervisory arrangements.
- Arising from the conclusions of complaints procedures and in support of high standards of supervision, a prospective supervisor may have extra conditions imposed. Another procedure exists that can lead to annulment of this requirement.
- The making of all important decisions concerning a research student's progress involves, in addition to the student's primary supervisor (and co-supervisor if one is required), at least one other experienced and qualified person. This may be the head of department or school, or his/her nominee, or, where there is a supervisory team, the associate supervisor.
- There are policies and procedures related to academic staff taking sabbatical leave or approaching retirement with respect to their acting as supervisors.

# 3 The Supervisor(s) (continued)

## Supervisory Teams

The greater use of supervisory teams was deemed useful and appropriate in the preliminary exercises and they have clear potential advantages. They can play an important role for inexperienced supervisors and allow for the better distribution of the academic workloads. However, the use of supervisory teams must be carefully managed to avoid 'empty roles' and the responsibilities of all members of the team, including the student, must be clearly defined. Indeed, formal supervisory teams may be undesirable in some cases, and they should not be obligatory, except that all students should have the opportunity for regular contact with another senior member of academic staff, who may be defined as an associate supervisor with a pastoral role.

A supervisory team could consist of the primary supervisor, a co-supervisor (often necessary on interdisciplinary or co-operative projects) and an associate supervisor.

- The primary supervisor, and any co-supervisor, would provide the subject expertise and have frequent contact with the student.
- Situations when co-supervision is necessary/allowed are defined so as to allow flexibility and take into account all standard situations
  - For clarity, the anticipated role and proportional contribution of each co-supervisor may be defined, with provision for revision.
  - Local regulations and guidelines should take into account situations when a PhD student is located and co-supervised in a research institute of the university or externally.
  - The possible roles, as research supervisors, of formally appointed adjunct members of academic staff of the university should be defined.
- The associate supervisor would act in a number of roles as appropriate. They could provide mentoring to less experienced supervisors, provide a pastoral role for the student and contribute an independent view in the case of conflict between another of the supervisors and the student.
- The responsibility of the supervisory team is to ensure the quality and rigour of the supervision process, the quality of the student experience, and to encourage the intellectual development of the student.
- The supervisory team also acts as a buffer in the case of unplanned absence or departure of one of the supervisors.

Supervisory teams may also provide opportunities for inexperienced members of academic staff to gain insights and expertise by allowing for their inclusion as extra members of teams. If so, their responsibilities should be limited and clear cut and might include:

- Participation in meetings with the student
- Participation in feedback on early drafts of reports and thesis
- Contributing advice according to his/her areas of expertise

## 3 The Supervisor(s) (continued)

### **Guidelines – Supervisory Teams**

- In defined areas or circumstances (or normally), the overall supervision of a research student's progress involves, in addition to the student's primary supervisor (and co-supervisor(s) if required), an associate supervisor who is officially assigned this duty for the whole of the student's project.
- All primary, associate and co-supervisors are aware of their responsibilities and rights with respect to the students they supervise, of the responsibilities and rights of their students, and of the regulations governing the operation of research programmes and examinations. In specific cases, the roles of an associate supervisor may be limited to generic and pastoral issues.
- Conditions requiring co-supervision are defined.
- There are defined criteria on the suitability of persons to act as co-supervisors, when they are and when they are not members of staff of the university.
- There are defined criteria on the suitability of persons to act as associate supervisors.
- There are procedures that protect the interests of students and supervisors in cases where a supervisor must be absent for periods of time longer than a few weeks, and when a student spends a period elsewhere doing relevant work.
- There are formal procedures that facilitate changes of primary supervisor, co-supervisor and associate supervisor.

## 4 The Student

### Recruitment

Opinions were expressed at the workshops that, before final commitments are made, a PhD student and supervisor or co-supervisors should meet to discuss the research project in some depth in order that all parties can assure themselves of the suitability of the project (for the student) and the student (for the project). It was also observed by students that *undergraduate* students should have the opportunity to learn of the importance and realities of postgraduate research training in order to prepare them for a career in research.

Normally, the minimum entry requirement for starting a PhD-level project is considered to be a 2.1 grade in the final year exam, or equivalent (for overseas students). Where a student has a basic degree with less than a 2.1 grade, a taught master's qualification in an appropriate area and with a suitable grade may make them eligible.

The routine initial registration of research degree students on a master's programme is a separate issue. Such initial registration is a safety measure to facilitate appropriate outcomes as progress to a higher-level research degree via a number of stages is assessed. Therefore, when a student already has a taught master's degree this should not be seen as a reason sufficient in itself for direct registration on a PhD programme and regulations should allow for initial registration for a research master's degree in such cases.

One obstacle to universities having a consistent two-part registration system with initial registration for a masters degree and then transfer to a PhD, is the condition attached to some grants that the student must be registered for a PhD from the beginning. Additionally, candidates with a 'taught masters' may be unable to obtain government grants if they are registered for another (research) masters degree. Universities should give consideration to establishing a registration status of 'PhD-track' or 'integrated Master/PhD' student. This status would apply to most students who intend to follow a PhD programme and have normally signed up to a programme of study or project that is (externally or internally) funded for at least a 3-year period.

Other matters that came up for discussion at the workshops were:

- The importance of efficient admission and registration processes to avoid undue delays.
- The particular problems encountered by overseas students.
- The introduction of a more flexible fee structure to allow registration per term rather than per academic year, particularly for students approaching the ends of their projects or writing up.
- Special fees, and associated incentives and safeguards for students who have completed all experimental/field/exploratory research and are 'writing up'.

### Part-time Students

At the workshops, several recommendations were put forward with regard to part-time students.

- Consideration should be given to the introduction of a part-time fee for research students who in reality pursue their studies on a part-time basis.
- A support structure for part-time (research) students should be initiated.

# 4 The Student

## Guidelines – Recruitment

- The university careers service and all appropriate academic units act to ensure that documents and workshops on what it means to undertake a research degree programme (whether internally or elsewhere), the uncertain nature of research and the wide range of possible career paths, are available to all interested students (at undergraduate and postgraduate level).
- Suitability criteria are defined for students applying to enter a research degree programme, criteria that take into account the needs of all faculties/colleges and are sufficiently flexible.
- Provisions are made to ensure that applicant students from abroad are not disadvantaged and that supervisors of foreign students are supported at all stages during recruitment, registration and throughout their studies.
- Direct registration on a PhD programme is possible.
- There are clear and logical regulations in place governing the relations between research masters and PhD degree programmes, and transfers between them. These regulations cover:
  - i Categorisation of ‘masters’ programmes as ‘taught’, ‘preparatory for PhD training’ (e.g. MRes), ‘research’ and ‘PhD track’.
  - ii Criteria for obligatory initial registration for master’s degrees for students considered by supervisors to be on a PhD track. (The registration process and records differentiate between ‘PhD track’ and other research masters students.)
  - iii Criteria for students permitted to register immediately for a PhD degree.
  - iv Criteria for the transfer of registration from research masters to PhD.
  - v Criteria for the transfer of registration from PhD to a research masters, including for when a student wishes to continue to a PhD.

## Guidelines – Part-time Students

- There are formal definitions of full-time and part-time students that are taken into account in the calculation of fees, all project timetables, work plans and estimations of progress and completion times.

## 4 The Student (continued)

### Stipends

There is considerable variation in the level of the stipend for PhD students with reports that it ranges from €8,000 to €23,000. However, although many consider this level to be inadequate, the Irish Government Scholarship level of €12,700 (2004 rate) has become a national norm. Supplemental income may also be obtained from teaching or from special faculty schemes. There are also regulations that set caps on the income of students receiving certain kinds of supports. In some cases this can be to the detriment of students, especially those who are on the lower end of the stipend scale. The duration of funding is also an issue with the funding period often unrealistically limited to three years.

In relation to information provision for students, university postgraduate handbooks and websites should contain an outline of funding opportunities for Irish and overseas students, including general information on funding available for short periods of research abroad and conference attendance.

### Support

Networking by PhD students should be promoted by the universities and a positive and supportive postgraduate research community should be fostered. The formalisation of existing postgraduate peer groups within the University, across other universities in Ireland and at national conferences should be encouraged.

Regular departmental/faculty seminar series should exist and should include postgraduate seminars to encourage the sense of belonging to a community of researchers. PhD students themselves could play a part in supporting newer students by putting together their own 'introduction to newcomers' documentation on the web and in establishing postgraduate research societies.

Support for the student is particularly important when things go wrong. Universities should ensure that postgraduate complaints procedures are independent and unbiased and that they facilitate conflict resolution at an early stage (see Section 7, Appeals and Complaints). Increased representation for postgraduate research students on committees at all levels would provide a means whereby their viewpoints on issues can be aired.

### Facilities

Recommendations in the reports of quality reviews of academic departments for the improvement of facilities for research students are common. Whilst it is acknowledged that departments and research groups work under tight budgets, it is reasonable for every research student to expect minimum provisions to facilitate their research. These might include the following:

- A dedicated writing space and sufficient access to computer hardware and the Internet, laboratory, field infrastructure and library facilities,
- Adequate funding and support for inter-library loans service and other library resources,
- A room for use by research students.



## 4 The Student (continued)

### **Guidelines – Entitlements, Duties, Responsibilities and Stipends**

- The entitlements, duties and responsibilities of the research student considering commencing a postgraduate research programme are defined and communicated clearly to the candidate. These include general matters as well as matters specific to the studentship in question, and may cover:
  - Fees and other charges and whether they are covered by the financial support on offer,
  - Attendance and reporting requirements,
  - Relevant codes of behaviour and practice,
  - Teaching, supervision and mentoring duties.
- The objective of the university is that studentships funded internally (taking into account the associated duties) are at least at levels equivalent to minimum nationally funded grants.

### **Guidelines – Support**

- There is a dynamic culture of creativity / scholarship / research in the university and in each research group, in which research students participate actively.
- There are guidelines that specify normal and minimum degrees and frequencies of consultations between a student and his/her supervisors, and give options when these cannot be maintained due to unusual circumstances.
- There is a mechanism that identifies students who work outside research groups, or whose project is unique in the faculty/college or institution with respect to its subject or methodology, and that facilitates the provision of appropriate supports.
- Supplementary support measures and training are provided for students from abroad who need such supports.
- The university publishes annually a list of PhD students, titles of projects and supervisors to encourage the development of national networks for PhD students and researchers.

### **Guidelines – Facilities**

- Research students are not recruited unless certain minimum common and individual facilities will be available for their use.
- The university has a policy that specifies overall minima for all general facilities used by research students, including special library access, book borrowing facilities, inter-library loans and access rights to certain staff facilities.
- Each school/department plans for the recruitment of research students to ensure that local facilities are sufficient to ensure them a high-quality education.

## 5 The Project

The planning of research projects and the prediction of experimental outcomes (even in the most general sense) are notoriously difficult, but experienced researchers can identify projects in their own disciplines that are unsuitable as PhD projects, or that are not achievable with the supportive expertise, facilities or resources available, or where no provisions are made for if the unexpected happens. Therefore, a provision whereby proposed PhD projects benefit from a 'second opinion' may be seen by a university as important to the maintenance of a reputation of excellence in research training. In practice, most PhD projects arise from externally assessed grant proposals and, therefore, their general validity is assured. Particular attention should be paid to the design and ongoing evaluation of individual PhD projects for students working in large research teams.

The situation in some discipline areas (particularly in the arts and humanities) may be quite different from the usual model in the sciences and technologies, where external circumstances may limit flexibility. In these disciplines, students are encouraged to explore and define their interests, and to make unanticipated strategic choices once they engage fully with the research topic. Consequentially, they often finish with a dissertation that is markedly different from what was proposed initially.

# 5 The Project

## **Guidelines – the Project**

- Ethical approval is obtained for relevant projects and there is a mechanism to ensure that such projects are identified and receive approval.
- The safety aspects of projects are considered and taken into account.
- There are regulations governing 'extra mural' research students and projects.
- Projects that involve experience and training in another institution are facilitated.
- The student and supervisor(s) are aware of university policy on intellectual property (IP) and all stakeholders are made aware of potential IP issues as soon as such issues become apparent.
- Where part or all of a thesis requires protection of IP (for a formally defined period), there is a mechanism for resolution of potential conflicts between this and requirements for publications to satisfy criteria for work worthy of the award of a PhD degree.

## 6 Induction and professional development

The strength of the PhD is that it provides for critical analysis and an original contribution in a specific area. Successfully achieved, this is an invaluable preparation for continued explorations in related areas and a good preparation for most high-level careers. No changes to PhD programmes should be implemented that will take away from this core strength. However, even highly specialised areas of study require generic skills, and some general competencies might reasonably be expected of all persons who attain the distinction of a doctorate. Of crucial importance in this respect is the standard period of funding for PhD programmes. With the time needed for the activities outlined below, this should be four years in total, and not three years as at present.

In the preliminary workshops, there was agreement on the importance of providing induction and courses supportive of professional development to PhD students and on their essential elements. Indeed, many of the universities already provide short induction and training programmes for research students. The widespread provision internationally of standard training for the development of PhD students was underlined for attendees at the Experts Conference. Academics from several disciplines reported growing expectations that a student should acquire a core of professional knowledge before embarking on a specific research path.

However, extra resources would be a major issue and many strongly expressed the view that taught elements could not be provided due to limited staffing etc. However, the research funding bodies are becoming very aware of this issue. This year, the HRB made two 'Training Site Awards' with a total value of €2 million. These are to improve the quality of PhD training by providing a broader education for young researchers and enhancing co-operation between students in different research groups. The main principles of these awards are:

- Students follow a structured training programme for year one, with courses in research methods, ethics, and various skills.
- Students are supported for four years rather than the standard three.

This builds on the Marie Curie Programme funded by the European Commission, which supports structured PhD training sites and networks. Hopefully, the HRB initiative will stimulate other funding bodies to undertake parallel initiatives.

Provisions should also be made for possible careers in academia. Most of the relevant skills and experiences are also directly beneficial to those pursuing other careers. Training, supervision and effective communication are important skills in nearly all occupations taken up by research degree graduates.

Division into the categories of induction and professional development is not clear cut as there can be substantial overlap between what might be considered necessary for an induction programme as opposed to that which is supportive of general professional development.

### Induction

An induction programme could be over a period of consecutive days or once a week over a period of several weeks. A more substantial programme could be spread throughout the first semester or year. Individual parts of induction may be provided best at a university wide level, within a faculty, and within a department.

## 6 Induction and professional development

### **Guidelines – Induction**

- There is a structured programme of induction for all research students.
- There is an initial, obligatory process/course for all students that introduces them to the central facilities and services of the university and makes them aware of all aspects of the research masters and PhD programmes, including research plans, performance monitoring and examination procedures. What may constitute a 'reasonable workload' and standard annual leave entitlements are also discussed. In addition, students' teaching duties, their rights and responsibilities, potential intellectual property issues, the rights and responsibilities of their supervisors, plagiarism, safety and ethical considerations, definitions of research misconduct, basic work conditions and regulations, and the supports available from careers and other student services are explained and discussed.
- There are also formal faculty/school induction programmes (or equivalent measures) that cover all issues specific to each faculty/school or specific discipline.
- Strong and responsive feedback mechanisms ensure that ineffectual elements and courses are discontinued or improved.

## 6 Induction and professional development (continued)

### **Professional development**

Ideally, all training and opportunities for the acquisition of general and specific skills relevant to the student's discipline and project should be provided continuously, so that students can avail of them with the least disruption of their primary work programme. Alternatively, access to such training should be ensured. Obviously cooperation within each university and between the Irish universities, and the acquisition elsewhere of appropriate training programmes and courses would be necessary to meet this goal.

Such arrangements would also allow students to avail of particular training at an appropriate point in their PhD programme, perhaps prompted by their research supervisor, e.g. skills related to thesis write up at the end of year two.

While there is conflict between the need for copious amounts of time devoted solely to research, other commitments and a reasonable completion time, the student and supervisor should be always mindful of the need to ensure his/her balanced professional development. Activities that contribute under more than one heading are especially valuable, such as spending time in another research centre, abroad or in Ireland.

### **Conference attendance and Publications**

The facilitation of conference and seminar attendance and researcher mobility is an essential part of PhD training and development. Research students should be encouraged to present their work at international conferences, at least once during the PhD programme. Supervisors should act to ensure that the work carried out by research students is published in peer-reviewed journals as quickly as possible. The supervisor should assist the research student in the preparation of relevant paper(s) thereby providing invaluable professional training to the student.

## 6 Induction and professional development (continued)

### **Guidelines – Professional development**

- There is a structured programme of professional development and opportunities for skills acquisition for research students with all elements available in any year, or, if feasible, in any semester or term. As appropriate, attendance and learning are monitored, and certificates issued.
- The University and its constituent units cooperate internally and with others to ensure that all such training provided is of a high international standard. The quality of such training is reviewed regularly through formal assessments and student feedback.
- Each student is able to access adequate training in all appropriate, basic skills including, as necessary, writing, document processing, data processing, presentation, statistics, safety procedures etc.
- Training in research methodologies, good research practices and safety procedures relevant to specific broad disciplines is provided in ways appropriate to the numbers of students concerned. The quality, consistency and relevance of such training is reviewed regularly through formal assessment and student feedback.
- Students who are to undertake fieldwork are given the necessary training in the appropriate skills related to their discipline and project.
- As students progress through their research projects, they are (formally or informally) given training on (and/or supervised experience of) applying for grants and writing articles for publication in peer-reviewed journals etc.
- When research students are also to be employed as tutors or demonstrators, basic training in appropriate teaching and supervisory skills is provided, with a sufficiency of such training given in advance of the commencement of teaching.
- Provided it does not impinge on progress with the PhD project, and with the agreement of the supervisor(s), it is possible for students planning an academic career to acquire a formal teaching qualification, such as a certificate in higher education.

### **Guidelines – Conference attendance and Publications**

- Research students present their work at local, national and international conferences.
- Supervisors ensure that research student's participate substantially, or play a leading role, in the preparation of research papers and articles.

## 7 Monitoring progress

In practice, for PhD students to fail at the final examination and not graduate with a PhD is relatively rare. To date standards have been maintained partly by extending the time allowed for completion, sometimes (for full time students) to six, seven or more years. However, it is also accepted that a significant proportion of students never complete, some having spent several years in the university before finally giving up.

Therefore, as the numbers of research students rise, careful and formal monitoring of progress is essential to maintain standards, to support completion; to ensure good completion times and to maintain a low failure rate. In this way, poorly performing students will be helped to improve and complete, or to obtain a formal qualification, or to move on to a more appropriate programme or to an alternative career path.

Accordingly, relevant regulations should facilitate periodic formal reviews, each with a range of possible decisions and recommendations that could see students unsuited to research to the level of a PhD:

- Exit before they have invested too much time, or
- Remain on a research master's programme, or
- Transfer (back) to a research masters programme, or
- Proceed to writing up and submitting for a research masters degree.

Most importantly, such measures should be designed and implemented to promote motivation and focus, while minimising unnecessary stress.

### Early-stage

To ensure that a student is fully aware of the depth and breadth of the research to be carried out, s/he should participate in, and contribute to, the planning of the research project. Work plans facilitate the smooth development of projects and should include: milestones, deadlines, reading assignments and reference to the acquisition of specific skills or to the validation of required methods.

In addition, a schedule of 'formal' meetings with the supervisor(s) should be agreed between the student and supervisor(s) for at least the first year. At the commencement of the project the frequency of such 'formal' meetings should be at least one per three months. Following each such meeting the supervisor should request that the student submit, within a couple of days, a workplan for the next period.

The meetings referred to above may form part of a defined supervisory procedure and should not include or replace the frequent meetings and discussions that underlie the essential trust and bond with the supervisor that is characteristic of good PhD level education. Recording the more important decisions made at formal meetings between students of supervisors is necessary because they:

- Reduce ambiguity when subsequent progress is being assessed,
- Help ensure student motivation and focus,
- Give students and supervisors confidence that a due process is being followed,
- Provide protection to supervisors and/or to students should difficulties arise.



## 7 Monitoring progress

### **Guidelines – Early-stage**

- There is an initial formal meeting between the student, the primary supervisor and all other members of any defined ‘supervisory team’, at which there is opportunity for clarification of procedures (including significant hurdles and criteria).
- At an early meeting also, the proposed programme of research (or of the process leading to definition of the student’s research project) is explained and discussed in detail.
- There is a requirement, and a procedure involving the student, for the development of a research plan and its revision at appropriate intervals.
- There is a formal early review of the student’s progress (within the first year for full time students) with defined options depending on rate of progress and particular circumstances. The procedures for such a review ensure clarity and transparency for the student.
- Where ‘PhD track’ students must register initially for a research masters’ degree and where research masters’ students may apply to register for a PhD, procedures and criteria for such transfers are defined and are clear.
- The regulations allow for, and support, the early exit of unsuitable students from research-based degree programmes.

# 7 Monitoring progress (continued)

## Mid- and late-stage

The timing and the number of reviews over the whole project should be carefully managed to avoid the process becoming over stressful, over burdensome, or a meaningless paper exercise without any benefit to the university, the supervisor(s) or to the student.

At the workshops, there was general agreement that a formal review of the progress of each 'PhD track' student should also take place about 12-18 months from the initial registration of the student. In other countries such a review is the norm and the overall programme in these countries may be structured such that a good performance at this stage results in a formal qualification. Possible mechanisms for such a review (some aspects of which are already in place in some Irish universities) were discussed at the workshops, including:

- A formal presentation of insights gained from the review of the literature and the results of research to date to a panel of at least three members, including all members of the supervisory team.
- A written report and/or a formal interview with the supervisory team (or, in the case of a sole supervisor, with the involvement of another member of academic staff).

In some other countries (France for example) students must obtain formal permission to submit a thesis for final examination. In others, the responsibility for the decision to submit may rest with the student. In the first approach, the decision process risks becoming as elaborate as the final examination itself; in the second supervisors may feel the need for a mechanism that allows their advice to a student to be recorded formally.

## Appeals and Complaints

For many sound practical reasons, the supervision of research students involves relatively close personal interactions between student and supervisor(s). Therefore, should this important relationship encounter difficulties, it is important to have a support system.

It is critical that any postgraduate complaint procedures are independent and unbiased and that they facilitate conflict resolution at an early stage. Defined rights and responsibilities of both student and supervisor help to ensure that expectations are realistic from the outset, and act as an aid in the prevention of unnecessary conflicts. A 'class-representative'-type system that could 'speak' for students in difficulty may also help. Other proposals in relation to this matter made at the workshops were:

- A 'supervisory team' approach should facilitate the identification and resolution of problems at an early stage.
- Complaints against students should be handled through a phased procedure based on Labour Law, including initial steps to resolve issues through stated 'informal' procedures.
- More serious complaints of misconduct should be dealt with through the procedures outlined in a general Misconduct Policy.
- A university 'Ombudsman's Office' to investigate and resolve serious complaints by or against a student that are not related to research misconduct.

## 7 Monitoring progress (continued)

### **Guidelines – Mid- and late-stage**

- Regular research group/departmental or more public presentations of interim results and findings are required of students.
- There are formal reviews of progress at regular intervals with defined options depending on rate of progress and particular circumstances. A brief written record is maintained for each review and the procedures for such reviews ensure clarity and transparency for the student.
- The defined options above allow for transfer of registration from masters to PhD or vice versa, and for exit from research training.
- The supervisor / 'supervisory team' must agree that sufficient progress has been made by a student before s/he may proceed to final write up and submission for examination: OR
- The formal decision to proceed to final write up and submit a thesis for examination rests with the student, but the student must show that s/he has obtained the advice of his/her supervisor / 'supervisory team' before a thesis may be submitted for examination.

### **Guidelines – Appeals and Complaints**

- There is a clearly understood procedure whereby at any time a student may make a complaint related to the project or its supervision, initially relatively informally but continuing to a formal process in appropriate instances.
- There is a clearly understood procedure whereby a student can appeal any formal decision made by his/her primary supervisor/'supervisory team' or progress review board.

## 8 The Dissertation

The efficient writing of a doctoral thesis requires forward planning, advance preparation, guidance and models, early feedback, a wide range of specific skills, attention to detail, and a determination to complete the task. Incentives may help also.

Norms as to the format of a PhD thesis vary from country to country. An integral thesis 'publishable in whole or in part' is a common format and many may be familiar with works on history, literature or art that originated as PhD theses. Alternatively, in many countries, PhD theses are collections of previously published articles bound together with a print run of a hundred or more. It is important that norms for thesis formats and the limits of what is acceptable are defined.

Normally (and more commonly, nowadays) the applicant will not have worked entirely on his/her own. Particularly in certain scientific disciplines, noteworthy advances in knowledge are only feasible with cooperation and inputs from colleagues and complementary disciplines. Therefore, PhD students often work in large research groups or teams and their successes may benefit, to a greater or lesser extent, from the inputs of others. All such contributions must be indicated clearly and acknowledged explicitly.

# 8 The Dissertation

## Guidelines – the Dissertation

- The format, maximum length and other attributes of a PhD thesis are specified in the university guidelines, with allowance made for reasonable variation and the different formats that are traditional for specific disciplines.
- University guidelines on thesis preparation cover issues such as plagiarism and the correct usage of quotations, and make clear the importance of the explicit acknowledgment at all relevant places in the thesis of all contributions of others to the project.
- Supports etc. are available to aid students in quick and efficient thesis writing. These include:
  - Systematic work planning including scheduled consultations with primary supervisor(s).
  - Additional or refresher training on work planning, appropriate writing styles, information technologies and document processing.
  - Provision of writing-up facilities.
  - Incentives to complete and submit.
- There are guidelines that indicate preferred deadline dates for thesis submission and give estimates of the normal time allowances for examination, implementation of required corrections and the processing of the reports of the examiners, leading (if there are no excessive delays) to graduation at a particular time.



## 9 The Examination

The examination of a student applicant for a PhD degree needs to be a sophisticated and carefully considered process. It comes at the end of three or more years of intense study / scholarship / research / creativity, and substantial expertise and effort are required in deciding if the candidate is worthy of success.

As noted above, throughout this project, the roles of the supervisor(s) are crucial for the provisions of advice, guidance and, often, of ideas. As articles are prepared for publication, the final thesis is written, and as the student prepares for examination, the supervisor(s) must also be available to advise and guide.

A PhD is awarded normally on the basis that a body of work carried out by the student is considered to be “a contribution to knowledge” or is “suitable for publication in whole or in part” but other aspects are also very important, including:

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

Evidence as to whether or not such criteria are met will be found in the thesis, but the oral examination is often critical to a full appreciation of the standards that have been achieved.

Although oral or viva voce examination is now practically universal in one form or another, the regulations in some universities still allow for examination on the basis of the thesis alone if the examiners recommend this. However, with improved communication technologies, oral examination with an external examiner at a remote site is often very easy to arrange. This possibility should be allowed for explicitly in the regulations and the options for omitting oral examination limited further, or eliminated altogether.

Depending on traditions in the country and university, the format of the oral examination varies from ‘private’, with just the student and examiners present, to ‘a public defence’, with a large panel of examiners, staff, other students and the entire available family of the examinee.

In Irish universities, where a public defence such as is found in France or in Sweden is not traditional, students in many academic departments now routinely give a ‘thesis seminar’ to the staff of the department and others who may be interested, as a complementary part of the examination process. In many disciplines, it is also now common for the candidate to make a presentation with audiovisual aides as the first stage of the private oral examination.

## 9 The Examination (continued)

### The Examiners

In Irish universities, all major university examinations involve the active participation and often the physical presence of external examiners. An external examiner must be from a different university (which at present means from outside the National University of Ireland [NUI] system for the constituent universities of the NUI) and a high proportion are in the United Kingdom, the rest of Europe or even farther afield.

An external examiner for a PhD candidate is chosen for his/her expertise in the field of study relevant to the project being considered. An internal examiner must have broad relevant expertise in the discipline in question and should be a sufficiently senior person with adequate relevant experience and training. Although, because of their specific expertise, external examiners have a critical role, this should not take away from the role of an internal examiner, who is in a position to act to maintain consistently high internal standards, particularly with respect to generic aspects such as the general approach adopted to the project, the rigour of statistical treatments or the quality of the writing and layout.

When a thesis is inter-disciplinary it is important to ensure that the combination of examiners in total represents sufficient knowledge and understanding of the relevant fields.

PhD examination boards may have just three members and it is still the situation that certain academic areas and disciplines such as engineering or nursing have low representations of one sex or the other. Therefore, while all reasonable efforts should be made to ensure that a candidate is not confronted with a panel of examiners composed entirely of the opposite sex, the balance of expertise on the board must be the first priority.

During the preliminary workshops there was much discussion on the role of the supervisor(s) during the examination process. Options suggested included:

- No direct participation of the supervisor in the examination process.
- Where the attendance of the supervisor is optional, the student should be asked for their preference.
- Attendance at the viva in a non-participatory role.
- Attendance at the viva in a semi-participatory role (permission to clarify issues).

Although in the past, in Irish Universities supervisors were often appointed as internal examiners for their own research students, and this is still current practice in some institutions, the practice in many countries has moved away from supervisors having any such direct role in the examination.

### General Arrangements

Examinations are stressful occasions for students, particularly when the student may feel alone and isolated, and their immediate future career may depend on the outcome. Therefore, it is important that the whole process, particularly the oral examination, be conducted in a good atmosphere and runs smoothly. The roles of the examiners and other participants, what they should do, and by when, should be defined clearly.



## 9 The Examination (continued)

### **Guidelines – the Examiners**

- There are procedures for the selection, approval (with respect to agreed criteria as to suitability) and appointment of the external examiner(s) and internal examiners.
- The student is informed when potential external and internal examiners and the overall make-up of the examination board are being considered.
- Provision in the make up of the examination board is made for where the 'student' is a member of staff of the university granting the degree.
- Where at all possible, PhD candidates are examined orally with all examiners physically present.
- In each broad academic area, records of the employment and the frequency of employment of external examiners are maintained and are available for consultation when new examiners are being appointed.

### **Guidelines – General Arrangements**

- Safeguards exist to avoid substantial administrative delays between submission of a thesis for examination and the examination itself.
- A clear description of the whole examination process from start to final approval of the examiners' report(s) is available to all concerned.
- There are written operating procedures and clear, simple forms to be completed, that facilitate the administration of the examination process.
- Formal responsibilities for organising the oral examination and all associated arrangements are assigned in good time and are clear.
- There is a procedure that ensures that the student is kept informed of arrangements and, as soon as possible, of any unavoidable changes.
- Oral examinations take place in a good environment, in a suitable location and with all standard facilities readily available.
- Student and examiner feedback on the examination process are sought routinely and summarised in an annual report.

## 9 The Examination (continued)

### **Oral Examination**

While traditionally, the external examiner often steered the oral examination and therefore, acted as de facto chair, some universities appoint an independent chair, who is not an examiner, to manage the examination process. All universities are encouraged to consider enabling this option in disciplinary areas where it is considered appropriate.

### **Revision**

Until recent decades, PhD theses had to be submitted 'hard bound' before being examined, and minor revisions usually involved pasting corrections onto existing pages in every copy. Major corrections required manual retyping and a doubling of costs. Since the submission of 'soft bound' theses became the norm, the consequences to the student of corrections being required are less severe and, overall, perhaps the general standard of theses submitted for examination has fallen.

In any case, the 'revision process' is sometimes the occasion for prolonged delays and substantial extra efforts by students, supervisors and examiners. Therefore, clear regulations and guidelines governing 'revision' are important to ensure quick progression to final approval and graduation.

## 9 The Examination (continued)

### **Guidelines – Examination, including Oral Examination**

- There are defined criteria for the award of the PhD that take into account the variety of disciplines in which the PhD is awarded.
- A preliminary short written report is prepared independently before the oral examination by each examiner.
- There is a defined list of outcomes to the examination that provides sufficient options, and supports the maintenance of standards.
- The student has a say as to the role of the supervisor(s) at the time of the oral examination.
- Simple, clear and adequate procedures are defined for all stages of the examination process. These include:
  - A simple, standard operating procedure for the examination process.
  - Definitions of the roles and responsibilities of internal examiners, external examiners and the supervisor(s).
- There are guidelines for the oral examination process that provide for:
  - Format and timetable.
  - Length of the overall examination.
  - Feedback to the student at the end of the examination.
- The characteristics of the report required in the case of examiner unanimity on the examination outcome are defined.
- There is a procedure that can be implemented in the case of examiner disagreement as to the examination outcome.
- There is a defined appeal procedure that can be used by a student or a supervisor in cases of disagreement with the examination outcome.

### **Guidelines – Revision**

- The format, attributes and number of copies to be lodged of the final thesis are specified, with provisions made for variations between disciplines.
- A particular internal examiner, with the support of the principal supervisor, is responsible for monitoring and assuring the implementation of corrections to the thesis that were prescribed by the examiners.
- As appropriate, any other relevant regulations, e.g. governing lodgement of the thesis to the university library, are defined clearly.

## 10 The Graduation

The PhD is a special degree that is awarded for original individual work of a high standard and this should be clear to those present when a PhD degree is awarded. In some Irish universities, at the award ceremony the relevant dean reads a brief synopsis of the achievements of each PhD graduand.

# 10 The Graduation

## **Guidelines – the Graduation**

- There is a special procedure for the awarding of a PhD degree that recognises its importance and special role.



# Monitoring PhD programmes

## Context

Compilation of the Interim Report for this project was a major learning exercise for all concerned. It was clear that the availability of data in relation to PhD programmes was variable and that there was little sector-wide agreement on common definitions or on what data to record. There also appeared to be limited analysis of existing data. To facilitate greater understanding and planning, there needs to be sector-wide agreement on definitions and data to be calculated and retained.

The primary public source of quantitative data on research students in Irish universities is the statistics section<sup>7</sup> of the Higher Education Authority website. These data are derived from annual returns made by the individual institutions. Masters enrolments are not disaggregated as between research and taught programmes. The enrolments do not distinguish between research PhD students and those enrolled on taught or professional doctorates. That said, it is gratifying to note that the findings of this project have already influenced the format of returns that the HEA is now requesting of the universities.

## Registration and Completion Data

It is desirable that each university maintain separate postgraduate student and graduate registers. If sufficient information is contained on these registers this will enable each university to monitor and analyse completion rates and completion times broken down by Department, School and Faculty.

Registers should distinguish clearly between full-time, part-time and 'write-up' students. In addition, students should be formally removed from the student register and placed onto the graduate register as soon as they have graduated.

Registration records which distinguish between full-time and part-time students and completion times for each category of student should be calculated separately. Finally, registration records should show where a student has transferred onto the PhD register from a PhD programme in another university.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.heai.ie/index.cfm/page/sub/id/710](http://www.heai.ie/index.cfm/page/sub/id/710) records Masters and PhD data by gender, Institution and field of study

# Monitoring PhD programmes (continued)

## Definitions – Registration Data

PhD by research degree programme: These guidelines cover PhD degrees. They do not relate directly to any other form of professional or taught doctorate (e.g. EdD or MD degree).

Master's (by research) degree programme: This project is concerned (indirectly) only with master's degrees where the research component (including a requirement to produce original work), is larger than the taught component when measured by student effort.

### Registration status:

For the years 2001-2003, according to the available data, the variation in the percentage of research students registered for a PhD degree varied from 39% to 75% within the seven universities. This large disparity is directly attributable to variation in procedures and practices between the universities. In some, the regulations require most students to register initially for a master's degree and then permit transfer to the PhD register only after a formal transfer process has been completed. This can take between 12 and 36 months. Other universities routinely permit initial registration for the degree of PhD directly.

#### PhD students:

- Students who were permitted to register initially for the degree of PhD in a university, having met defined criteria.
- Students who were registered initially for a research Master's degree or a 'PhD Track' as defined below and who have successfully completed any formal process in place to change their registration status to that of a PhD student.

#### 'PhD-track' students:

- Students who intend to follow a PhD programme and have signed up to a programme of study or project that is funded for at least a 3-year period but who do not fulfil the criteria to register directly for a PhD.

**Field of Registration:** Each PhD student is registered in a Faculty (or College), and also in an appropriate sub-faculty unit such as a Department or School.



# Monitoring PhD programmes (continued)

## Guidelines – Registration Data

The **STUDENT REGISTER**:

For each student the following information is required:

- Name
- Supervisor(s)
  - Primary Supervisor
  - Co-supervisor (if applicable)
  - Associate supervisor (if applicable)
- Registration Time\*
  - Date of initial registration
  - Year of study
  - Date of completion (see definition of completion time)
- Registration status
  - Taught Masters degree
  - Masters degree (by research)
  - 'PhD track'
  - PhD degree
  - Other doctoral degree (DBA, MD, EdD)
- Registration mode
  - Full-time
  - Part-time
  - 'write-up' status
- Affiliation
  - Faculty/College
    - School
    - Department

The **GRADUATE REGISTER** (updated annually):

For each student record the following information is included:

- Name
- Gender
- Research Degree Awarded
- Graduation date
- Title of thesis
- Department, School and Faculty affiliation
- Supervisor(s)
- Completion time

- 
- \* The register should also facilitate the recording of unusual circumstances such as:
- the formal deregistration of the students (for maternity or family leave, for instance)
  - the mid-project transfer of a student from another university

# Monitoring PhD programmes (continued)

## Definitions – Completion Data

**Completion rate:** None of the universities currently uses a formal definition of completion rate. In the case of PhD students, completion rate should be defined as the percentage of those students who having, at any stage, been registered in a university as a PhD student (including the category of 'PhD track' student), are subsequently awarded a PhD.

**Completion time:** None of the universities currently uses a formal definition of completion time. For the purposes of this study, the completion time for a PhD degree is understood as being:

The time between initial registration of the student for a PhD degree or a research master's degree (where the student transferred to the PhD register subsequently)

and

The time when the completed thesis (including all corrections or revisions required during the examination) has been approved by the relevant examination Board)

less

Any period of formal deregistration (such as, for example, certified illness, maternity leave etc.) where such deregistration is permitted by specified university regulations.

# Monitoring PhD programmes (continued)

## **Guidelines – Completion Data**

ANNUAL STATISTICS are calculated and recorded in relation to:

- Completion rates and completion times for PhD degrees (see definitions)
  - By Faculty (or College) and for the university overall
  - For full-time and part-time students
- Completion rates and completion times:
  - Are calculated separately for full-time and part-time students
  - Take into account unusual circumstances such as
    - the formal deregistration of the students (for maternity or family leave, for instance)
    - the mid-project transfer of a student from another university



## Appendix: Work-programme

### **Background**

The 2002 applications of all seven universities to the *HEA Quality Assurance Programme Funded under the National Development Plan 2000 – 2006* included a request for support for an IUQB proposal to undertake a number of 'Sectoral Projects', concerned with the dissemination, publication and implementation of good practice, namely:

- 1 Student Support Services.
- 2 Mathematics, Teaching and Learning.
- 3 Organisation of PhD programmes.

According to the application, the project in each of these three areas would involve:

- The analysis of relevant data and departmental review reports to date for all seven universities.
- A set of seminars/workshops (1 per university) to obtain input from university officers/staff.
- A conference with international experts.
- Preparation and publication of a code of good practice.

The '*Organisation of PhD programmes*' project was initiated by the IUQB in spring 2003.



## **Project outline**

### **Initial actions**

- 1 Establish current practice.
  - i Collect from each university a report summarising recommendations related to PhD programmes that have been made in peer review group reports arising from reviews of academic departments and other units.
  - ii Collect from each university a report summarising relevant generic recommendations in PhD external examiner reports since January 2001.
  - iii Collect from each university statistics in relation to PhD registrations/output/ completion times per discipline, mix of research masters / PhD on a discipline / departmental basis.
  - iv Collect existing documents governing PhD programmes from all seven universities, including entry requirements, regulations, arrangements for external examination, guidelines for supervisors, information pamphlets for students covering general arrangements, ethics, plagiarism etc., timetables and curricula for training courses.
  - v Prepare a summary of current practice.
- 2 Obtain participation of Deans/Vice-presidents for research, deans of graduate studies, Registrars etc.
- 3 Promote the organisation of a number of workshops to discuss, clarify and prioritise issues and to familiarise participants with international trends and good practice.

## **Activities**

### **Coordination**

Meetings of Deans of Research & Graduate Studies from all seven universities were held in the CHIU Boardroom on 26th May 2003 and on 8th December 2003.

Jim Gosling (NUI Galway) and Padraig Walsh (DCU) assisted in the organisation of the Project and the following "Coordinators" were identified in the seven universities:

NUI Galway	Gerard Hurley
NUI Maynooth	Jason Twamley
UCC	David Cox
TCD	John Saeed
DCU	Padraig Walsh
UL	Nicholas Rees
UCD	Mary Lambkin

### Workshops

Over the period September to November 2003, each university held a workshop to facilitate inputs to this Project from its staff and relevant officers. A report from each was submitted and concise versions of these are included in the Interim Report (see below).

### The Interim Report

In order to summarise all of the information collected and as a central input to the Experts Conference (see below), an Interim Report was prepared. The Interim Report included the following sections:

#### 1 Introduction

The project

#### 2 The Status Quo

Regulations over the seven universities

Graduation and registration data

Recommendations from review reports

Recommendations from external examiner reports



### 3 Reports from the Workshops

Dublin City University

National University of Ireland, Galway

National University of Ireland, Maynooth

Trinity College Dublin

University College Cork

University College Dublin

University of Limerick

### 4 List of Issues for the Good Practice Guidelines

#### Experts Conference

A conference entitled 'Good Practice in the Organisation of PhD Programmes' was held in The Westin Hotel, Dublin on the 29th April 2004. The programme commenced with presentations and question sessions on practices in four countries:

Sweden – Professor Mikael Holst, Karolinska Institutet

France – Professor Marie-Paule Pery-Woodley, Université de Toulouse

USA – Professor Susan G. Ernst, Tufts University, Massachusetts

UK – Professor Tony Fell, University of Bradford

During the afternoon there were breakout sessions chaired by the invited speakers and a plenary discussion.

The Conference was attended by about 120 academic staff and senior officers and administrators for the seven universities, and representatives from many relevant organisations including the Department of Education and Science, Dublin Institute of Technology, European Universities Association, Higher Education Authority, Higher Education and Training Awards Council, Health Research Board, Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences, Irish Research Council for Science, Engineering and Technology, Science Foundation Ireland and the Union of Students in Ireland. The discussions were prolonged and lively and the secretary of each breakout group reported at the plenary discussion session.



### **Further Consultations and Finalisation of these Guidelines**

After the above Experts Conference, the list of issues for the Good Practice Guidelines included in the Interim Report was used as the basis for a first draft of these guidelines. Early on in the drafting process, it was decided that each section should start with a broad outline of the main relevant issues in order to place in context the specific guideline items, which follow.

Extensive modifications were made to the pre-final draft document following its presentation at the conference “Strength and Numbers” on Postgraduate research training organised by the Conference of Heads of Irish Universities on 10 November 2004, from which a lot of constructive feedback was obtained. In addition, the draft was reviewed and revised in light of feedback obtained from a focus group held on the 17th November 2004 with PhD students representative of all seven Irish universities and, finally from the feedback obtained from several experienced academics in the sciences and humanities, both in Ireland and overseas, who were invited to review the pre-final draft.

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