



**The Quality Assurance Agency
for Higher Education**

**Operational description (incorporating guidance
to institutions) for the special review of
postgraduate research degree programmes
(England and Northern Ireland)**

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Operational description for the special review of postgraduate research degree programmes (England and Northern Ireland)

Introduction

- 1 This document provides an operational description of the special review that will apply for postgraduate research degree programmes (RDPs) in England and Northern Ireland. The review, announced in the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) publication *Postgraduate research degree programmes: minimum standards and funding* (HEFCE 18/2004) as part of the broader strategy for securing the quality of RDPs, will take place in 2005-06¹.
- 2 The main purpose of the review is to ensure that all higher education institutions (HEIs) receiving funding from HEFCE and Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland (DEL) for RDPs have policies and procedures in place that are robust and effective in securing and enhancing the quality and standards of RDP provision. In September 2004, QAA published a revised *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education (Code of practice)*, *Section 1: postgraduate research programmes*². The review of RDPs will draw upon the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, to see the extent to which institutional policies and procedures are in alignment with the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes* and its precepts.
- 3 The review will not address the quality of research more generally.

Scope

- 4 The review method described in this paper will apply to all HEIs in England and Northern Ireland which are in receipt of HEFCE funding for RDPs or from DEL in respect of HEIs in Northern Ireland. The special review includes all RDP students registered for an award of the institution. This includes HEIs which have registered RDP students and which are without research degree awarding powers.
- 5 HEIs which are not in receipt of funding for RDPs are not obliged to participate in the review but have the option to do so. HEFCE wrote to all such institutions in May 2005.
- 6 The review will cover:
 - institutional arrangements
 - the research environment
 - selection, admission and induction
 - supervision
 - progress and review arrangements
 - development of research and other skills
 - feedback mechanisms

¹ www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/circlets/2004/cl18_04/

² www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeofpractice

- assessment
- student representation
- complaints
- appeals.

Defining research programmes

- 7 The review is intended to apply to the PhD (including the New Route PhD and PhDs awarded on the basis of published work), and all forms of taught or professional doctorate and research 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.

Relationship to institutional audit

- 8 The special review of RDPs is a one-off exercise. Once the special review has been completed, all further consideration of the quality of provision for RDPs will be part of the institutional audit process which will be introduced in 2006-07. The reports produced as a result of this special review will form part of the evidence base for institutional audit.
- 9 In order that the review can provide a comprehensive baseline of information, there will be no exemptions from the review of RDP for institutions which have recently undergone an institutional audit.

The special review and RDP funding

- 10 There is no direct link between the special review and funding. However, HEFCE reserve the right to review funding for any institution where it is found that an institution has not:
- considered the intentions of the revised *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*
 - reflected on its own practices and taken the steps, where necessary, to ensure that appropriate changes are being made to align with the intentions of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.

Monitoring qualification rates in research degree programmes

- 11 As part of a separate, parallel, exercise HEFCE will monitor, through Higher Education Statistics Agency returns, the proportions of students who obtain their qualifications after different periods of time. This information and any institutional commentary on their qualification rates will form part of the evidence base when review teams are making judgements about the quality and standards of RDP provision. More information is available at www.hefce.ac.uk/research/postgrad/moncomp.htm

Consultation and pilots

- 12 The draft operational description and questionnaire was circulated at the beginning of February, with a deadline for comments by 22 April 2005. QAA received approximately 80 responses. The responses have been carefully considered and, where appropriate, revisions have been made to the operational description.

- 13 A pilot project involving three HEIs has also taken place. The outcomes of the pilot have also fed into developing the review method, and the guidance to institutions.

The review method

Overview

- 14 The review method adopts a desk-based approach, which involves the evaluation by reviewers of an institution's response to a questionnaire about how the institution has aligned its policies and procedures with the revised *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. Each submission will result in a report to the institution and HEFCE. There is also provision within the method for institutional visits where a follow-up visit is considered necessary. A visit by reviewers will only take place normally where there are particular **causes for concern** raised by the institutional response to the questionnaire.

Review teams

- 15 A peer review team will judge the extent to which a HEI's processes and procedures for its RDPs are appropriate and satisfactory and align with the expectations of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. The reviewers will work in teams, with the work of each team coordinated by a review coordinator. The review coordinators will help ensure consistency both within and across the review teams. A QAA Assistant Director will assume overall responsibility for the management of the review, providing guidance and support as required.
- 16 Prior to the review, institutions will be informed as to the membership of the review team allocated to consider their response to the questionnaire and draft the report.
- 17 Reviewers will be selected by QAA from nominations made by awarding HEIs and other appropriate institutions. Existing institutional auditors for England and Northern Ireland and reviewers in Wales and Scotland, who meet the criteria, may be invited to participate in the review of RDPs. The criteria for the selection of reviewers includes:
- extensive experience of the development and management of research students in higher education, eg acting as a supervisor of research students
 - wide experience as a researcher in higher education, including the management of research programmes and developing the institutional research environment
 - participation in the quality assurance of research programmes and of the research postgraduate learning environment
 - personal and professional credibility with heads of institutions and senior managers in the higher education sector
 - ability to assimilate a large amount of disparate information; to analyse and draw reliable conclusions about complex arrangements; and to undertake research and investigation into documentary and oral evidence in order to form judgements
 - clear oral and written communication skills
 - ability and willingness to use electronic communications.
- 18 Training for reviewers will be undertaken by the QAA.

Questionnaire

19 The primary method for gathering information for the review will be a questionnaire. The questions are based on the areas covered by the precepts in the revised *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, and focus on the institution's approach to the management and support of RDP activity. When responding to the questionnaire institutions will be asked to provide supporting evidence to substantiate their claims and to reference it to their responses. The questionnaire is attached as Appendix 1.

Visits

- 20 The review method includes provision for review teams to visit an institution where there is a **cause for concern**. A cause for concern may be generated by the evidence that the institution has not:
- considered the intentions of the revised *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*
 - reflected on its own practices and taken the steps, where necessary, to ensure that appropriate changes are being made to meet the intentions of the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.
- 21 Any visit to an institution is likely to take the form of discussions between the review team, and staff engaged with the supervision and management of RDPs, and between the team and a representative group of students. Discussions will focus on specific issues derived from the outcomes of the survey and the supporting evidence provided by the institution. The exact nature, scope and timing of any visit will be determined by agreement between the institution and QAA following the reviewers' evaluation of the survey.
- 22 Before any visit is made, an institution will be given the opportunity to provide additional evidence to address any concerns the reviewers may have.

Judgements

- 23 Using the outcomes of the survey and the supporting documentation, the review team will report on the institution's ability to secure and enhance the quality and standards of its RDP provision through its alignment with the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*. The judgement will be expressed in terms of the quality of RDP provision as being **appropriate and satisfactory** or, where this is not the case, where **further action is required**.
- 24 The judgement made, whether it be appropriate and satisfactory or further action required, will be an holistic judgement.

Reports and sign-off

- 25 The review team will produce a report for each institution on the outcomes of the RDP review. The reports will not be published. The final reports on RDP will be submitted to the institution and to HEFCE.
- 26 The draft report is prepared and submitted to the institution as soon as possible following the reviewers' final consideration of the outcomes of the survey. Copies of the draft reports should be with institutions by mid-May 2006. The institution is invited to provide QAA with corrections of errors of fact, within three weeks of receipt of the draft report. The final report is prepared in light of the institution's response. Where a visit to an institution takes place, the draft report will be submitted as soon as possible following the visit.

- 27 The review is completed when it is formally signed off. Where the report makes a statement of appropriate and satisfactory provision, the review is signed off when the report is sent to HEFCE. In the event of a judgement of further action required, the provider will be asked to send an action plan to QAA within three months of the report being signed off setting out how the matters raised in the report have been addressed. Twelve months after the end of the review a QAA officer will visit the provider to confirm the effectiveness of the action plan. The means of removing a cause for concern will be through the institutional audit process.
- 28 QAA will also produce an overview report for the exercise as a whole, which will be published.

Evaluation of the process

- 29 QAA will encourage institutions and reviewers to contribute to the evaluation of the RDP review process by inviting comment on the reviews in which they have participated.

Complaints and representations

- 30 Complaints about the conduct of the special review and representations about the judgements made by the review team are considered by QAA in accordance with the formal procedures published on its website (www.qaa.ac.uk).

Review timetable

Academic year	Month	Task
2004-05	February-April	Consultation with higher education sector on the <i>Operational description</i>
	May-June	Consideration of the outcomes of the consultation
	June-September	Pilots to test process
		Production and distribution of revised operational description and questionnaire
2005-06	September-November	Selection and training of reviewers
	October-November	Briefing for institutions
	February	Responses from HEIs due Friday 10 February 2006
	March-April	Analysis of responses by review teams
	May-June	Production of draft reports, circulation to HEIs and responses to QAA Any review visits will take place now
	July	Final reports to HEIs and HEFCE

Appendix 1 - questionnaire

Introduction

- 1 The questionnaire is intended to provide QAA with information on the institution's quality assurance framework for RDPs. Particularly, how the framework aligns with the precepts of the revised *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.
- 2 The review process recognises the validity of differences across disciplines in the characteristics of the research environment and in the management of quality and standards. Where differences exist, institutions may want to make this clear in their response, and show how the institution manages and monitors differences of approach in relation to quality and standards.
- 3 The institutional responses should include a description of key features and a commentary on the institutional approach to assuring quality and standards under each of the precepts along with evidence to substantiate the claims. It would be helpful if institutions could indicate, under each section, as precisely as possible where the evidence to support claims about alignment to the revised *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes* can be found in a particular document. Occasionally you may wish to add an explanatory note to the evidence source.
- 4 Your response and the supporting evidence (see below, paragraph 9) should consist of material from existing documents. It should not be necessary for new material to be written for the review.
- 5 Where an institution has introduced new policies and procedures in response to the revised *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*, but where completed evidence is not yet available (eg annual monitoring), it would be helpful if an explanation of the change is given.
- 6 It is anticipated that the average response to the questionnaire will typically be around 6,000 words, although there is no penalty for a shorter or longer submission.
- 7 It is left to the discretion of an institution to decide the evidence it considers demonstrates its alignment with the *Code of practice, Section 1: Postgraduate research programmes*.
- 8 To avoid having to send too much supporting evidence, in cases where there may be multiple examples of evidence (eg discipline-level student handbooks), the institution is invited to submit a representative sample to support their submission.
- 9 As a desk-based review method has been adopted, it is important that institutions provide evidence in a form which is easily accessible. It would, therefore, be very helpful if documents are provided electronically (eg on a CD-ROM and labelled clearly) and where appropriate access to relevant documentation on the institution's intranet. Where evidence is not available electronically, it can be submitted in hard copy.
- 10 QAA needs three copies of your completed questionnaire and CD-ROM. Please send these to Julian Ellis at QAA no later than Friday 10 February 2006. An

electronic version of the questionnaire is available at
www.qaa.ac.uk/reviews/postgraduate/

11 Please send your institutional submissions and CD-ROMs to:

Julian Ellis
Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
Southgate House
Southgate Street
Gloucester
GL1 1UB.

If you have any further queries please send them to the following address:
RDP.specialreview@qaa.ac.uk.

The questionnaire

Name of institution

Number of RDP full-time equivalents

Full-time

Part-time

1 Institutional arrangements (see precepts 1-4)

How does the institution assure the quality of postgraduate research programmes?

In your response you may wish to consider:

- institutional regulations for RDPs
- institutional codes of practice
- the monitoring of RDPs against internal and/or external indicators and targets, including any institutional commentary in relation to monitoring Higher Education Statistics Agency returns on completion rates for RDP students.

2 The research environment (see precept 5)

What arrangements does the institution have in place to make sure that the research environment provided for research students is appropriate?

In your response you may wish to consider:

- the research environment's capacity to support research and research students by providing appropriate facilities
- the quality of the research occurring.

3 Selection, admission and induction (see precepts 6-10)

When selecting RDP students, how does the institution manage their selection, admission and induction?

In your response you may wish to consider the following:

- the institution's selection and admission policy
- the support and guidance given to staff making admissions decisions
- the entitlements and responsibilities of research students
- information provided on the academic and social environment.

4 Supervision (see precepts 11-14)

What policies and procedures does the institution have in place for the supervision of research students?

In your response you may wish to consider:

- the institution's policy on the appointment of supervisors
- the institution's policy on supervisory teams
- the guidance given to supervisors for their role
- the written guidance provided for supervisors and students
- the volume and range of responsibilities for RDP students assigned to individual supervisors.

5 Monitoring and review arrangements (see precepts 15-17)

How does the institution monitor and review the progress of research students?

In your response you may wish to consider:

- the mechanisms for monitoring and supporting student progress, including formal review stages
- the written guidance provided to students and supervisors on keeping records of meetings and related outcomes.

6 Development of research and other skills (see precepts 18-20)

In what ways does the institution ensure that appropriate development opportunities are available to research students?

In your response you may wish to consider:

- opportunities for personal and professional development
- the identification and review of students' development needs
- opportunities for students to record personal progress and to reflect on the potential application of the skills they have acquired.

7 Feedback mechanisms (see precept 21)

What arrangements does the institution have in place for collecting and acting upon feedback from students, staff, examiners and others?

In your response you may wish to consider:

- opportunities for feedback and for outcomes of feedback to be communicated.

8 Assessment (see precepts 22-24)

What arrangements does the institution have in place for the assessment of research degrees?

In your response you may wish to consider:

- the assessment criteria for RDPs
- the clarity and availability of assessment criteria
- the extent to which assessment procedures are clear, fair and consistent.

9 Student representation (see precept 25)

What arrangements does the institution have in place for RDP student representation?

In your response you may wish to consider:

- the clarity, fairness and consistent application of institutional procedures for student representation
- opportunities for students to express their views.

10 Complaints (see precept 26)

What arrangements does the institution have in place for dealing with student complaints?

In your response you may wish to consider:

- institutional complaints procedures.

11 Appeals (see precept 27)

How does the institution deal appeals from RDP student?

In your response you may wish to consider:

- institutional appeals procedures.