

Graduate School

**Postgraduate
Research Code of
Practice**

2019

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Introduction

The UK Quality Code for Higher Education ([the Quality Code](#)) is the definitive reference point for all UK higher education providers. It makes clear what higher education providers are required to do, what they can expect of each other, and what the public can expect of them. The Quality Code covers all four nations of the UK and all providers of UK higher education operating overseas. It protects the interests of all students, regardless of where they are studying or whether they are full-time, part-time, undergraduate or postgraduate students.

Doctoral degrees are qualifications rooted in original research: the creation of new knowledge or originality in the application of knowledge. The doctorate is therefore unique in the array of qualifications offered by higher education providers. Other key reference points for doctoral degrees are the doctoral qualification descriptors included in the frameworks for higher education qualifications (for England, Wales and Northern Ireland and for Scotland) and [QAA's Characteristics statement for Doctoral Degrees \(2015\)](#).

[Chapter B11 of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education](#) states the Expectation that

Research degrees are awarded in a research environment that provides secure academic standards for doing research and learning about research approaches, methods, procedures and protocols. This environment offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes from their research degrees.

The chapter comprises eighteen indicators, which form the structure of this Code. The indicators are reproduced below, along with commentary on how the principles underpinning each indicator are delivered at the University of Cumbria.

This code has to be read in conjunction with the University's [Postgraduate Research Assessment Regulations](#). This code should be viewed alongside other University of Cumbria policies, for example, information about intellectual property, and health and safety.

Regulations for Research Degrees

Indicator 1: *Higher education providers that are research degree awarding bodies have regulations for research degrees that are clear and readily available to research students and staff, including examiners. Where appropriate, regulations are supplemented by similarly accessible, subject-specific guidance at the level of the [faculty, school], department, and research centre or research institute.*

The University's regulations for postgraduate research degrees are contained as part of the *Postgraduate Research Assessment Regulations*, and are made available to research students, staff and examiners. The regulations include information about admissions procedures, supervision arrangements, support structures, progression, assessment, complaints and appeals processes.

The University of Cumbria *Research Degrees Handbook* is made available to students, staff and supervisors. In addition, a set of Good Practice Guides for Supervisors are

made available and considered at supervisor training each academic year. In addition to this Postgraduate Research Code of Practice the University of Cumbria has a University Code for Research that incorporates the UK *Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers*.

Review of the Code

Indicator 2: *Higher education providers develop, implement and keep under review codes of practice for research degrees, which are widely applicable and help enable the higher education provider meet the Expectation of this Chapter. The codes are readily available to all students and staff involved in research degrees, and written in clear language understood by all users.*

We regularly review the code.

Monitoring of Provision

Indicator 3: *Higher education providers monitor their research degree provision against internal and external indicators and targets that reflect the context in which research degrees are being offered.*

Institutes are asked to review their postgraduate research provision as part of the annual monitoring and planning process. The University uses the Key Performance Indicators accepted by the Office for Students (OfS), the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (the QAA) and the Research Councils as a basis for benchmarking and performance measurement, both internally and across the sector.

Additionally, the Graduate School completes an Annual Review. The Director of Research and relevant committee reviews registration, retention, withdrawal and submission rates, taking account of individual students' circumstances where these have a material effect. The Research Degrees sub-committee monitors the national postgraduate research experience survey (PRES) returns, and considers evidence from other indicators on a periodic basis.

The Academic Quality and Development (AQD) considers returns, and evidence from other indicators on a periodic basis. In so doing, the University takes into account equality objectives, feeding into the work of the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Manager.

Research Environment & Training

Indicator 4: *Higher education providers accept research students only into an environment that provides support for doing and learning about research, and where excellent research, recognised by the relevant subject community, is occurring.*

All supervisors are research-active, and the University has a long-established and successful environment that provides support for doing and learning about research, evidenced by its relatively high completion rates.

Students are required to undergo a wide training and development programme. Within the University, the "transferable/ professional skills" Research Skills Development

Programme is coordinated by the University Graduate School. The “discipline specific” skills are provided within the relevant Institute or Research Centre. Our comprehensive research training programme aligns with the Vitae Researcher Development Framework (RDF). Students use the RDF planner for the identification of skills development and needs, and to articulate the actions needed to facilitate the necessary skills development.

Our Research Skills Development Programme sessions run from October to June. The sessions are held at one campus location with facility for using video-conferencing (Skype4Business) at other campuses and for those accessing the session remotely. Each July a 2-week *Doctoral Summer School* is held. The summer school includes the *Research Student Conference* for students to present their work in progress. The research skills development programme provides opportunities for research students to mix across disciplinary boundaries, and encourages the development of peer support networks. A virtual learning environment aligned to the RDF supports the programme. Training on ethics is a mandatory component of the research skills development programme.

Admissions

***Indicator 5:** Higher education providers’ admissions procedures for research degrees are clear, consistently applied, and demonstrate equality of opportunity.*

Students are admitted by the University on the recommendation of the Director of Institute or nominee. The proposed supervisor(s) should be specified. Application for research degrees is by individual application to the University. All information is on the University Graduate School website <http://www.cumbria.ac.uk/research/prospective-students/>

Applications are accepted through the Graduate School. Applications should be accompanied by additional documentation (research proposal/abstract, two academic references, transcripts of previous higher education studies, evidence of English language proficiency for students whose first language is not English).

All applications for research are handled by the Graduate School and are forwarded to the relevant academic Institute or centre for review by the Institute’s doctoral director or similar. Normally, the director will consult one or more colleagues before making a decision on a student. This decision takes the form of a recommendation to the Graduate School, who will review the decision and issue the appropriate letter to the applicant (normally an offer of admission or a rejection). In certain circumstances, principally where the Institute or graduate school is unable to obtain sufficient additional information on an applicant to make a decision, an application is deemed to have lapsed.

***Indicator 6:** Only appropriately qualified and prepared applicants are admitted to research degree programmes. Admissions decisions involve at least two members of the higher education provider’s staff who have received training and guidance for the selection and admission of research degree students. The decision-making process enables the higher education provider to assure itself that balanced and independent admissions decisions have been made in accordance with its admissions policy.*

The Institute or research centre, in consultation with the Graduate School, is required to ensure that the student is appropriately qualified for the proposed programme of work including language ability for students whose first language is not English. Prospective supervisors may offer advice to applicants (for example, to inform applicants of how to present evidence of a match of research interests) in advance of the application being made; this advice should not be of a nature that might bias the admission decision.

All admission decisions involve at least two academic staff of the University, normally including (at least one of) the prospective supervisor (s), and Head of the Graduate School.

Interviews are used as part of the admissions process, with video-conferencing facilities being employed where appropriate to ensure equal access to prospective students who are located far from Cumbria.

The offer letter and other materials sent to incoming students refer to the expected total fee payments (including any 'bench' or other supplementary fees), the minimum and maximum periods of study, requirements placed on the student, and arrangements for enrolment and registration. In the case of international students, information is provided about visa arrangements. International students on a Tier 4 visa are required to undertake a number of additional elements for registration in order to comply with Home Office visa and immigration requirements ([UKVI](#)).

All potential students must fulfil the University regulations for admission.

Student Responsibilities & Entitlements

***Indicator 7:** Higher education providers define and communicate clearly the responsibilities and entitlements of students undertaking research degree programmes.*

Each research student is entitled to receive an appropriate amount and type of supervision (to give them a realistic prospect of successful completion), to expect an appropriate research environment in which to work (including access to training opportunities, seminars and academic discussions), and to have access to appropriate facilities. The precise nature of each of these varies from Institute to Institute. Research centres, and academic institutes ensure that students have adequate facilities for them to carry out their work effectively. All researchers have access to the Postgraduate Research Study rooms at Carlisle Fusehill Street, Ambleside and Lancaster campuses. Special arrangements must be made where equipment breakdown or a shortage of specialised equipment causes delay to the student, and the Institute should attempt to minimise such disruption.

Responsibilities and any entitlements of students are clearly described in the *Research Degrees Handbook*, and on the VLE blackboard sites.

All students are advised of the expectations within the Handbook; attend & keep records of supervision sessions, attend meetings, seminars, lectures as required by the supervisor (s), have a timetable to completion, and monitor this regularly, agree any periods of absence, discuss any problems with supervisor (s) at the time.

Student Induction & Information

Indicator 8: *Research students are provided with sufficient information to enable them to begin their studies with an understanding of the environment in which they will be working.*

The University provides an induction programme for all new research students, which includes orientation information and details of relevant University procedures and personnel and is designed to clarify expectations on such things as submission time, quality of research, support available to students, and amount and type of supervision. This induction is supported by comprehensive provision of research training opportunities aligned with the [Researcher Development Framework](#).

Our research skills development programme is supported by extensive online materials, offering access to part-time students and those studying away from Cumbria as well as to students who are studying at Cumbria. Students are made aware of the mechanisms for raising concerns or issues.

Supervision Arrangements

Indicator 9: *Higher education providers appoint supervisors with the appropriate skills and subject knowledge to support and encourage research students, and to monitor their progress effectively.*

Supervisors should be active in research, with knowledge of the student's research area and/or the theoretical approach to be applied. Supervisors should hold an academic qualification at least at a level equivalent to that for which the student is registered, or should have considerable experience of research at doctoral level. Members of staff on probation (i.e. with less than two years' experience) should not normally be appointed as a student's sole or lead supervisor. They could be appointed as a co-supervisor with a more experienced colleague. This process is outlined in the University's *Research Degree Supervision & Supervisory Teams: Eligibility Criteria*.

The lead supervisor is expected to ensure that proper supervision can be provided and maintained during any periods of study leave or absence by supervisor(s), or time spent abroad by the student. The University, with assistance from the supervisor, will take steps to safeguard appropriate provision (including, where necessary, providing help in exploring the transfer of the student to another institution) in the event of the supervisor(s) leaving the University and there being no other appropriate supervisor readily available.

If difficulties with the supervisor cannot be resolved through either informal or formal routes, the student may ask the Head of the Graduate School (or other appropriate senior member of staff) for a change of supervisor. If the situation cannot be resolved, the Institute is expected within reasonable limits to provide an appropriate alternative source of supervision.

The Head of the Graduate School will ensure that supervisors have the training and support they require to undertake effective supervision, through the Graduate School programme. This support might include recommending a supervisor to attend training courses, conferences, etc., teaching relief or adjustment of other responsibilities.

Supervisory Team

Indicator 10: *Each research student has a supervisory team containing a lead supervisor who is the clearly identified point of contact.*

Each research student will have a minimum of one lead supervisor, who will be part of a supervisory team. There must always be one clearly identified point of contact for the student, which will normally be the lead supervisor. The lead supervisor will have primary responsibility for the student.

The Institute and Head of the Graduate School must take into account when registering students, the need to create a supervisory team with appropriate expertise (although not all members need to be subject specialists).

Supervisor's Responsibilities

Indicator 11: *Higher education providers ensure that the responsibilities of research student supervisors are readily available and clearly communicated to supervisors and students.*

The supervisor(s) is expected to:

- give guidance on all aspects of the project
- help the students to carry out an analysis of training and learning needs
- maintain contact through regular meetings
- help their student formulate a research plan
- ensure that they understand what their student's expectations are
- be accessible to the student at other appropriate times when advice may be needed (ensure students know when you are not available)
- request written work as appropriate, and returning such work with constructive criticism in reasonable time
- ensure that their student is aware of how their research fits into any research groups or projects of which you are part
- coordinate the supervisory team
- give guidance about literature, training, ethics, research techniques and academic conventions
- help the student develop their critical thinking
- give feedback on their overall progress
- advise on courses, both specialist and concerning transferable skills
- help the student set realistic deadlines and to submit their thesis on time
- report annually on the student's progress through the annual appraisal
- advise the student on appropriate dissemination events, where to present their work, conferences and opportunities for publication (being aware of financial need)
- read and comment upon the whole of the final thesis
- prepare students for their viva, and advising on subsequent corrections they may have to undertake

Clear guidance on the expectations of supervisors is provided in supervisor training, the *Supervising Research Students: Good Practice Guide* and the *Research Degrees Handbook* for students.

Supervisor's Workload

Indicator 12: *Higher education providers ensure that individual supervisors have sufficient time to carry out their responsibilities effectively.*

Research degree student supervision is taken into account when a staff member's workload is reviewed at their annual appraisal. Cumbria has a policy that no member of staff should normally be supervising more than six PhD students (including part-time students) as a lead supervisor.

Supervisors should not be responsible for more research students than can adequately and equitably be supervised. The number will depend on the supervisor's overall workload and other commitments. Directors of Institutes are expected to ensure that the workload allocation model takes into account the number and type of research students that a supervisor has responsibility for, in a consistent and transparent way.

Alternative Supervisor

Where, for reasons of academic leave or otherwise, the lead supervisor is unable to undertake supervisory responsibility for a prolonged period, Institutes will appoint an alternative supervisor, normally from the student's supervisory team.

Student Progress

Indicator 13: *Higher education providers put in place clearly defined mechanisms for monitoring and supporting research student progress, including formal and explicit reviews of progress at different stages. Research students, supervisors and other relevant staff are made aware of progress monitoring mechanisms, including the importance of keeping appropriate records of the outcomes of meetings and related activities.*

The *Research Degrees Handbook* and indicator 11 provides guidance on suitable frequencies of supervisory sessions for part-time and full-time students, but there is flexibility in respect of the mode of implementation, electronically-based discussion and telephone tutorials being used extensively with part-time students based off-campus.

The normal process is for all students to be appraised annually based on a presentation to their supervisory team and completion by both student and lead supervisor of the annual appraisal form, the contents of which should be mutually shared. These forms are returned to the Graduate School administrator who reads them and refers any causes for concern to the Head of the Graduate School.

Based on the research proposal presented as part of the admissions process, an initial draft programme of work, which can be completed in the time and with the resources available, will normally be drawn up as early as possible and approved by the supervisor(s). The supervisor(s) will give guidance on the timing (normally in the first three months for full-time students). Where possible it should include:

- a probationary outline of the thesis, to be expanded or modified as the research progresses;
- a statement of the research and the sources to be examined;
- a probationary timetable for carrying out the research and writing the thesis (if renewal of funding depends on successful transfer of registration from

Probationary PhD to Confirmed PhD status, work should be planned accordingly). It should also include an indication as to when transfer might normally be expected

- any training courses to be attended and successfully completed and other personal development opportunities that are appropriate.

The student's programme of work should be revised and updated at least annually as the research progresses.

Supervisory teams are responsible for carrying out an assessment of students' progress annually. The assessment should include a recommendation as to whether the student should be allowed to progress. The student should be told about the outcome of the assessment.

If progress or the standard of work is considered below that generally expected, the student should be given positive feedback on how matters might be improved including guidance on where to seek support from within the University if this is required in addition to that provided by supervisors. In some cases, it will be appropriate for the review meeting to include the Head of the Graduate School.

If the progress continues to be unsatisfactory, the student will be given a written warning that unless certain targets are achieved satisfactorily by a specified date the student will be referred to the relevant Academic Quality Committee with a recommendation that the student's registration be terminated. Forms of record keeping including the use of the RDF as a research skills log have been incorporated into the personal development portfolio (PDPs).

The Graduate School administrator advises new research students, and reminds supervisors annually of the need to keep appropriate records of the outcomes of meetings and related activities. The administrator will also put in place necessary arrangements for the transfer/ confirmation and viva panels.

The Transfer/ Confirmation panel will consist of a participating chair and another academic who will not be a member of the supervisory team. Information on panel composition for the viva can be found at Indicator 17 below.

Doctoral researchers, for various reasons, need to seek an intercalation of studies for a period of time, such intercalations, should first be discussed with the supervisor and subsequently with the Head of the Graduate School who will approve a designated period of intercalation. Further information on this will be found in the *Research Degrees Handbook*. Intercalations should not normally be requested to begin retrospectively.

Student Development

Indicator 14: *Research students have appropriate opportunities for developing research, personal and professional skills. Each research student's development needs are identified and agreed jointly by the student and appropriate staff at the start of the degree; these are regularly reviewed and updated as appropriate.*

Institutes are expected to ensure that each student's development needs (including research training, discipline-specific training, and broader generic skills) are identified and agreed jointly by the student and supervisor, initially during the student's induction

period. The student's development needs will be reviewed at least annually during the research programme (as part of the periodic appraisal process) and amended as appropriate.

Opportunities for students to acquire generic and transferable skills are provided through the Research Skills Development Programme, annual Research Student Conference, other events and through Research Centres and academic Institutes research seminars. The Research Skills Development Programme covers the substance topics suggested by the Vitae RDF.

A range of other pertinent topics is covered during a three-year cycle. This provides an excellent opportunity for research students, novice supervisors and experienced supervisors from a wide range of academic disciplines to meet in small groups for informed discussions. The research degree Summer School takes place annually. Other opportunities to develop research and other skills arise through the places of employment of many part-time students, and through participation in conferences and learned society meetings organised through supervisory teams.

All research students are expected to engage with an appropriate selection of these, chosen in consultation with their supervisors, initially during their induction period and subject to periodic review by supervisors. Each full-time research student is expected to undertake an average of two weeks of skills development for each year they are registered.

All research students are expected to undertake a skills audit (using the RDF) with their supervisors to discern their needs and the time necessary for the required skills development. The University uses the Researcher Development Framework (RDF) for the identification of skills development and needs, and to articulate the actions needed to facilitate the necessary skills development. Doctoral researchers share their Action Plans with lead supervisors whose responsibility is to advise courses of action (for example in relation to specific skill development within the subject) and to advise the Graduate School administrator of a specific need which can be addressed through the research skills development programme and/or summer school.

The Graduate School administrator will also advise on the availability of external opportunities (for example through Vitae, UKCGE or GUILDHE Research). Supervisors are expected to make themselves familiar with the resources available, especially on-line, as generated by suitable external agencies, as well as those (such as Blackboard) which are available internally.

Each research student is expected to have completed appropriate development activities as a condition of transfer from Probationary PhD to confirmed PhD status.

Supervisors are expected to encourage students to present their work at staff and graduate seminars, and especially at the annual Research Student Conference and university events and conferences.

If research students have teaching duties, the Institute is expected to require them to undertake appropriate training, as outlined in the *Teaching Opportunities for Doctoral Students*, and to give them adequate instruction in the use of teaching equipment. Supervisors must ensure that all students are aware of safe operational procedures particularly when using specialist equipment and techniques.

Evaluation & Feedback

Indicator 15: *Higher education providers put in place mechanisms to collect, review and respond as appropriate to evaluations from those concerned with research degrees, including individual research students and groups of research students or their representatives. Evaluations are considered openly and constructively and the results are communicated appropriately.*

The views of research students are sought and represented within the university in a variety of ways, including through: research student representatives on university research committee; research ethics panel; research degrees sub-committee; and Institutional or research centre groups; and through the periodic appraisal process (student and supervisor). Full-time candidates working on campus are included in Institute meetings. All research students have access to the Head of the Graduate School through the graduate school administrator; and sensitive issues are dealt with as robustly and transparently as confidentiality permits.

The Graduate School annual review includes responses to issues raised by research students, supervisors, external examiners and other interested parties. There is an annually updated, continually reviewed Action Plan, which seeks to address any issues raised from the various sources. The report and Action Plan also represent the initial formal response to issues raised by, for example, University Audit and the PRES survey. Informal routes include close relationships developed with the Institutes through the Research Skills Development Programme. The library has a member of staff with particular responsibilities for research, including research students, thereby provides opportunity for feedback and interaction between researchers, students and library provision.

Academic Standards

Indicator 16: *Higher education providers that are research degree awarding bodies use criteria for assessing research degrees that enable them to define their academic standards and the achievements of their graduates. The criteria used to assess research degrees are clear and readily available to research students, staff and examiners.*

The University has responsibility for ensuring its regulations are met.

These include the following:

- maintaining the regulations for postgraduate students;
- admitting students and ensuring that admissions standards are maintained;
- checking that Institutes are monitoring students and dealing with complaints and problems;
- approving recommendations confirming students' status as being registered for PhD;
- appointing examiners;
- recording the submission date of theses and sending them to the examiners;
- approving examiners' recommendations and awarding degrees;
- handling reviews and appeals;
- maintaining an overview of all postgraduate activities.

Detail is provided in the *Research Degrees Handbook*.

Assessment Procedures

Indicator 17: *Research degree final assessment procedures are clear and are operated rigorously, fairly and consistently. They include input from an external examiner and are carried out to a reasonable timescale. Assessment procedures are communicated clearly to research students, supervisors and examiners.*

The [Postgraduate Research Assessment Regulations](#) define the assessment procedures for the award of research degrees, which are operated rigorously, fairly and consistently, include input from at least one external examiner and one internal examiner, and are carried out to a reasonable timescale. These are restated clearly in the *Research Degrees Handbook* and in the *Examining Research Students: Good Practice Guide*.

Support for students in preparing for the viva is provided through the research skills development programme offered by the Graduate School. Meetings of supervisory teams, linked to the periodic appraisal process, will also prepare students for the experience of the viva.

Complaints & Appeals

Indicator 18: *Higher education providers put in place and promote independent and formal procedures for dealing with complaints and appeals that are fair, clear to all concerned, robust, and applied consistently. The acceptable grounds for complaints and appeals are clearly defined.*

The university has formal procedures in place for dealing with student complaints. The University of Cumbria has formal procedures for dealing with appeals made by research students (which includes the Academic Appeals Panel and students' right of appeals), are defined in the *Postgraduate Research Assessment Regulations*. These are clearly stated in the *Research Degrees Handbook* and in the *Examining Research Students: Good Practice Guide*.