8   ASSESSMENT

8.1   Procedures and national criteria for final assessment of research degrees

Guidelines on assessment are set out in the Core Statutory QA Guidelines. The procedures below are additional procedures for the assessment of research degrees.

Procedures for the assessment of research degrees are consistent with the NFQ award type descriptors for research degrees – award type descriptor 'M' for the Masters degree; and award type descriptor 'O' for Doctoral Degrees.

8.2   Elements of assessment

Procedures for assessment for research degrees include clarification of research output, most often a thesis *(here meaning a coherent body of detailed written work on a specific topic particular to the student)* but may also be a written submission with a selection of papers, performance practice or research artefact and, in some cases, performance in a *viva voce* (oral examination). Processes for submitting the research output are clearly outlined. Assessment for doctoral degrees always includes a *viva voce*. Other circumstances in which a *viva voce* is required, available on request, or not facilitated are clearly outlined.

Procedures are clear with regard to the impact on the overall result of the thesis evaluation and the performance of the candidate at the *viva voce* where applicable.

8.2.1   Research theses and contribution

Procedures are clear on the variety of formats for capturing research contribution available to students, consistent with international norms in the disciplines in which programmes are offered.

Specific contexts are identified in which formats other than a monograph may be appropriate. All permitted formats facilitate assessment against an equivalent standard.

Clear guidelines are available to students, supervisors, examiners and members of an examination board on each format, including considerations to be taken into account in choosing it, at what stage a student can indicate the intended format, who can approve the format, standards, length and presentation and conventions and protocols for student vetting of their draft thesis using appropriate software.

Procedures are in place which require acknowledgment of the specific contributions of others, if any, to the research project.

Procedures are in place for accessing, disclosure, dissemination and archiving of the thesis, subsequent to award.

8.2.2   *Viva voce*

Clear procedures are in place for the conduct of oral examinations which outline:

- who is responsible for arranging and communicating the date and location of the exam

- what mode of engagement is permitted

- expected duration

- acceptable locations

- who may be present, and who (if anybody aside from the student and examiners and independent chairperson) may contribute, and under what circumstances

- the circumstances, if any, in which the examination may be conducted with an examiner at a location remote to the student, and the conditions relating to how this is done

8.3   Assessment boards and examiners

Procedures relating to assessment/examination boards for research degrees indicate:

- who comprises the assessment board (internal (if any) and external examiners; independent chair; and others) and the circumstances where additional members may be required (e.g. circumstances that require the appointment of a second external examiner or other additional examiners)

- the role and responsibilities of each of the board members in the context of all elements of the examination including circumstances where the opinions of external examiners are given particular weight in final assessment decisions and recommendations

- the arrangements and conditions for formal nomination and appointment of the board members including:

  o qualifications required (e.g. normally qualified to at least the equivalent NFQ level of the award sought by the research student); experience required, and defining what type of research activity (standard, degree of relevance and how recent) is required

  o those excluded from involvement in the assessment; defining what is considered to represent a conflict of interest, restrictions on repeat appointments or clusters of appointments from specific schools, departments, research units; what constitutes appropriate independence from the student, project and/or institution

  o the criterion for being considered 'external' or 'internal' (with external generally understood and accepted as independent and external to the provider)

  o what qualifications and experience are required for those members of the board that are not involved in the examination of the student (e.g. independent chair)

- where records of external examiners appointed for research degrees, for each broad academic/discipline area can be consulted, when new appointments are being considered

- how candidates are informed of possible examination board members in advance of their appointment and afforded an opportunity to raise concerns known to them regarding a proposed nominee

- a robust mechanism for ensuring appointments of examiners are in line with the stated conditions and requirements and reviewing the effectiveness of the procedures for appointments and outcomes required

8.4   Assessment outcomes and revisions

Procedures for assessment outcomes and revisions are clear and notified in advance:

- All potential outcomes to research degree assessment and examinations are clearly worded and communicated to all involved. Outcomes which require a full re-examination are distinct from those which require specific revisions to a thesis, but no re-examination.

- The consequences for students of non-completion of required changes or failure to resubmit are stated and made known in advance.

- Assessment boards communicate clear and succinct rationales to candidates for the outcome of their examination and, in cases where revisions are stipulated, candidates are given specific details as to what is required of them.

- The provider defines the minimum basic characteristics for the reports that examiners prepare for the provider's examinations board.

- The process and timeline to verify completion of required corrections and amendments to theses is clear.

- The process and timelines for re-examinations are clearly defined.

- Arrangements are in place to deal with situations where research degree students do not carry out satisfactorily, or within a reasonable time, specified changes/resubmission of a thesis.

- The provider establishes processes to deal with cases of examiner disagreement.

- Final decisions related to the outcomes of research degree assessments, and where appropriate decisions that a student may progress to graduation, are made by appropriate bodies in the provider in accord with the regulations of the provider.

- Matters regarding the certification of qualifications and criteria for the withdrawal of an award, including the standing of the award documentation and other matters relating to research outputs, are in place.

8.5 Appeals

The provider has a defined appeal mechanism that is available to any research degree candidate who wishes to appeal the decision of his/her assessment board. The description of this mechanism is clear, comprehensive and is readily and openly available to students and staff.