

QAA discussion paper about doctoral programmes

Introduction

The UK GRAD Programme (www.grad.ac.uk) is supported by the UK Research Councils and managed by CRAC, the career development organisation. UK GRAD represents a 3000-strong network of individuals (senior academics, supervisors, policymakers, researchers and employers) with interest in the postgraduate researcher development agenda.

The core remit of the UK GRAD Programme is to work with the UK HE sector to support the personal, professional and career development of postgraduate researchers, however experience of all aspects of research degree programmes (RDP) is represented in our network. We work through a network of regional Hubs across the UK, based in universities and supported by Steering Groups that represent the interests of all the universities and research institutes in their region.

Our comments are based on our experience as a national body supporting universities to embed personal, professional and career development into research degree programmes, our experience of working with employers and our involvement in the development by the EUA of the recommendations for the doctoral cycle of the Bologna Process.

We recognise that as autonomous institutions it is the responsibility of individual universities to decide what are the appropriate standards for their research degrees. We have only responded to questions where we feel it is appropriate to do so.

Dr Janet Metcalfe
Director, UK GRAD Programme
janet.metcalfe@grad.ac.uk
www.grad.ac.uk

1 Definition of a research degree in section 1 of the *Code of Practice*

Revised section 1 of the QAA *Code of Practice*: postgraduate research programmes (September 2004), covers the following research qualifications: "... the PhD (including the New Route PhD and PhDs awarded on the basis of published work), 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."

Since publication of revised section 1, QAA has become aware that some professional doctorates may not fit this definition. At the time of publication, the

definition was drafted so as to exclude the majority of MRes degrees; institutions have not so far informed QAA that this is inappropriate.

Q1: *Is the Code of Practice definition still appropriate? If not, how would you wish it to be amended?*

The QAA may wish to consider how closely the UK should align the definition of 'research degrees' with the doctoral cycle in the Bologna Process. The outcomes from the EUA doctoral cycle workshops expresses the doctoral cycle as ...training by and for research and is focussed on the advancement of knowledge through original research'.

The current QAA definition reinforces the perception that the 'PhD' is the principal research degree and others merely adjuncts. Given the increasing diversity of titles for doctoral qualifications in the UK (eg PhD, DPhil, New Route, Integrated, EngD, D.Ed, EntD, Dmus, DClinPsych, etc.); the risk of confusing potential doctoral candidates and employers; and the importance of ensuring international recognition of UK doctorates; it is important that all doctorates are equally recognised within the doctoral definition.

An example of this confusion is the use in the UK of the term 'taught doctorate' as an alternative for 'professional doctorate'. This can be (and is) interpreted in other countries, by potential candidates and employers as a doctorate that does not include any research component, much less one where the research component is 'larger than the taught component. Although we acknowledge that most, if not all, research degrees now have some forms of 'taught' elements for research skills and other skills development, it is our view that the terminology 'taught doctorate' is an oxymoron and unhelpful. It should not be included in the QAA definition.

2 Masters degrees as entry qualifications for doctorates

This section relates to work being undertaken by QAA in relation to the 'M' level benchmarking project¹ and how it links to doctoral programmes.

The relevance of masters programmes in this document is mainly their use as entry qualifications for doctoral degrees. Points arising from the outcomes of the QAA 'M' level benchmarking conference in February 2006 as well as from recent conversations with practitioners in the sector include:

- i) The requirement of some but not all research councils for either a '1+3' doctoral programme structure (which includes the equivalent of a one-year master's programme, including in some cases the MRes or professional training), or a stand-alone master's degree (taught or research) as an entry qualification for a doctorate.
- ii) In the UK it is still common in some subjects for bachelors graduates to be admitted to doctoral programmes (they may be nominally registered for a research

¹ See notes of conference: *Securing and maintaining academic standards: benchmarking M level programmes*, 17 February 2006, at: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/benchmark/masters/MlevelbenchmarkingFeb06.pdf>

masters degree in year 1-2). Any requirement to change this practice could affect institutions' ability to recruit to doctorates in these subjects.

iii) At a European Universities Association seminar held in Nice, 7-9 December 2006² (in preparation for the May 2007 Bologna ministerial meeting in London), the question of masters qualifications for entry to doctorates was discussed. The draft final conclusions from the seminar contain the following statement in relation to entry qualifications for doctoral programmes:

"2.3 Ensuring access and admission

In a fast-changing environment, it is essential to maintain flexibility in admissions to doctoral programmes, and full institutional autonomy: diversity of institutional missions and context, and the growing importance of lifelong learning, mean that there are good reasons for different entry requirements in institutions and programmes provided fairness, transparency and objectivity is ensured;

The Bologna commitment that the second cycle gives access (= right to be considered for admission to the third cycle) should be maintained, but access to the third cycle should not be restricted to this route."

iv) A concern that, with the political pressure for alignment with continental Europe, UK institutions' masters programmes will not be feasible in the future because most M level degrees in the rest of Europe last for more than one calendar year and up to two years. Although more recent Bologna developments recognise that qualifications are awarded for exit achievements and ability, the significant difference in volume between 1 and 2 years of study could affect the ability of UK masters graduates to be admitted to doctoral programmes in other European countries.

Q2: *What are your views about masters degrees becoming necessary entry qualifications for doctoral degrees?*

We acknowledge that it is the responsibility of individual universities to define entry requirements for their doctoral degrees. However, to encourage wider access to education and lifelong learning we support the EUA recommendation to provide and maintain flexibility in access to doctoral programmes, and transparency and objectivity in admission processes.

Q3: *Do you have any comments about other specific issues raised in (i) to (iv) above?*

3 The increasing diversity of UK doctoral degrees, including programme structures and periods of study

i) **Diversity** of doctoral degrees is particularly relevant to the UK. In continental Europe, the PhD is the predominant research qualification, whereas in the UK, there has already been some diversification, particularly in professional doctorates but also in research masters qualifications. However, at the EUA seminar in Nice referred to above it was clear that other European countries are developing professional doctorates and that these are likely to become more widely available in future. The following is a relevant extract from the draft final conclusions of the seminar:

² Draft final conclusions – preparing recommendations for the London communiqué, are at: http://www.eua.be/fileadmin/user_upload/files/Nice_doctorates_seminar/final_recommendations_in_EUAtemplate.pdf

“3.1 Diversifying doctoral programmes

A number of diverse routes to the doctorate have been developed in Europe in recent years. These recent developments include doctorates tailored towards specific professions (so-called “professional” doctorates), joint doctorates and the European doctorate, and a variety of university-industry collaboration based doctorates.

All awards described as Doctorates should (no matter what their type or form) be based on a core of processes and outcomes. Original research has to remain the main component of all doctorates. There should be no doctorate without original research.

Core processes and outcomes should include the completion of an individual thesis (based upon an original contribution to knowledge or original application of knowledge) that passes evaluation by an expert university committee with external representation.

Professional Doctorates

So-called “professional” doctorates are doctorates that focus on embedding research in a reflective manner into another professional practice. They must meet the same core standards as ‘traditional’ doctorates in order to ensure the same high level of quality. It may be appropriate to consider using different titles to distinguish between this type of professional doctorates and PhDs.

In order to ensure a broad discussion on this topic it will be important to ensure the dissemination of information on the rapidly growing number of professional doctorates – particularly in the UK but also in other countries - across the entire European higher education sector.”

ii) ***Periods of study and doctoral outcomes:*** it has become the ‘norm’ for institutions to expect full-time doctoral candidates to complete their programmes within three to five years (or the equivalent for part-time students). Full-time research council funded doctoral students normally receive funding for three to four years (four years for those on the ‘1+3’ programmes mentioned in 2(i) above). There is pressure on doctoral candidates, not only to complete on time, but to show they have acquired a range of skills (research- specific and generic) through their doctoral programme.

Linked with section 4 below, it has been suggested that, across the range of disciplines, it is now unrealistic for universities to expect dissertations ‘of publishable quality’ or ‘leading edge’ research from doctoral candidates within the periods outlined above. This situation is alluded to in Chris Park’s paper for the HEA³, in the section headed ‘*Fitness for purpose*’, where he mentions “widely articulated tensions between product (producing a thesis of adequate quality) and process (developing the researcher), and between timely completion and high quality research”.

Q4: *For those in an academic institution, how is your institution responding to the diversity of doctoral degrees? For example, how are the regulations for the PhD and professional doctorates similar and different?*

Q5: *Are entry qualifications and candidates’ profiles for different doctorates the same or diverse? If they are different, please provide further information about the differences in relation to each type of doctorate.*

Q6: *Do you have any general comments about periods of study or outcomes of doctoral programmes?*

In order to support the international recognition of UK doctorates, we strongly support the EUA recommendation that ‘all awards described as doctorates should (no matter

³ *Redefining the Doctorate*, Discussion Paper, Chris Park, The Higher Education Academy, January 2007, ISBN 978-1-905788-29-3, pp 6-7.

what their type or form) be based on a core of processes and outcomes', rather than defining a period of study. See comments in Q1.

The aim in explicitly supporting the personal, professional and career development of doctoral candidates during their research degree programmes is to produce more competent researchers and to improve their employability. This support is implicit in good supervision, but not necessarily achieved consistently for all doctoral candidates.

UK GRAD was instrumental in developing an agreed statement of skills and attributes (the 'RCUK Joint Skills Statement'), which extended beyond research-specific skills. This statement recognises that these skills 'may be present on commencement, explicitly taught, or developed during the course of the research'. It is our view that the development of these skills does not necessarily need to extend the length of the research degree programme. Conversely, there is value to be gained through skills development activity that enables researchers to be more effective and efficient in their approach to their research and therefore more able to complete on time.

Neither do we support the view that the development of skills should be bolted on to research degree programmes as an additional requirement, or assessed separately. We believe that the personal, professional and career development of researchers should be individual, needs driven and embedded within their research degree programme.

4 Attributes of doctoral graduates in relation to the doctoral qualification descriptor included in the Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland⁴, how these are assessed, and the related expectations of their supervisors, examiners and employers

i) ***Doctoral qualification descriptor:*** We now turn to the formal definition of the attributes that might be expected of doctoral graduates in the UK, as set out in the Doctoral qualification descriptor in the FHEQ (England, Wales and Northern Ireland). These are attached as an Annex to this paper.

The existing descriptor (published six years ago) contains generic, research-related attributes that can be applied to doctoral graduates in any subject. The descriptor also mentions transferable skills necessary for employment. It does not differentiate between different types of doctoral qualification.

In 'Redefining the doctorate' (see above) Chris Park touches on the 'Expectations and requirements of employers' (p.19). He argues that, although doctoral graduates "usually do bring added value to an enterprise – including specialist knowledge, research and analytical skills, future potential maturity - ..." some research suggests they "lack commercial awareness, are generally over-specialised, face difficulties in

⁴ The framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ), Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, January 2001, ISBN 1- 85824 - 549 - 4, available at:
<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/FHEQ/EWNI/default.asp#annex1>

adapting to non-academic work cultures, and often have unrealistic expectations (McCarthy and Souter 2006)".

ii) **Originality**: as mentioned in section (i) of the doctoral qualification descriptor and also in the extract from the Nice final conclusions, a fundamental criterion for doctoral degrees is that they should include some form of 'original' research. For example, most institutions' regulations for doctoral degrees contain references to an expectation of original work, or contribution, and this is one of the criteria used to assess doctoral candidates.

However, there is no universally agreed definition of what *originality* means when used as a criterion for making a doctoral award. Is it original thought? Carrying out new work? The application of existing knowledge to a new area? Some institutions have clear criteria for awarding doctoral degrees that include statements about making a significant contribution to learning, either through the discovery of new knowledge (which might also change existing views), developing a new theory, or applying existing knowledge in new situations.

Q6: *In your view do the attributes of doctoral graduates described in the FHEQ doctoral qualification descriptor still apply?*

Although we believe the FHEQ doctoral qualification descriptor still has currency, the QAA may wish to refer to the 'Dublin Descriptors' for doctoral degrees. Using common descriptors across Europe will aid the international recognition of UK doctoral degrees.

Q7: *How would / do you / does your institution, define 'originality' in the context of doctoral study?*

Q8: *Does the qualification descriptor remain appropriate for different types of doctoral graduate?*

We reiterate our view that all doctorates should be equally recognised within the doctoral definition and therefore it follows that there should be an overarching qualification descriptor, which is equally applicable to all forms of doctorate. Furthermore this should be expressed in a language that is understandable for all stakeholders, including individual researchers and employers. There is research that supports the view that doctoral candidates can go into their viva without a clear understanding of the requirements of the award.

Q9: *To what extent, if at all, should employer views influence the doctoral qualification descriptor?*

The doctoral qualification descriptor needs to encompass all aspects of a doctoral degree, which contribute to ensuring doctoral candidates demonstrate their competency as researchers at an appropriate level. One aspect of this is exploring whether the doctoral qualification is meeting the needs of employers.

The recent Government-sponsored Lambert and Leitch Reviews both highlighted the importance of stronger business-university collaboration, strengthening the employer voice and ensuring demand-led skills development. It is unlikely that employers can, in any meaningful way, be included in crafting descriptors. However, there may be

lessons to be learnt in how some professional doctorates have engaged professional bodies and employers in defining standards.

However, our view is that it is appropriate to seek the views of employers, or more practically employer organisations, in defining the skills and attributes they need from doctoral candidates. It is important to recognise that the Higher Education sector is the predominant employer of doctoral graduates and the diversity of views and requirements of other employment sectors means that consensus is unlikely to be achieved.

iii) ***The assessment of doctoral candidates in the UK:*** in the UK, the assessment of doctoral candidates involves a 'closed' oral examination, involving a small number of people including the candidate, his / her examiners and, depending on the circumstances, possibly an independent chair of the examination and sometimes the candidate's supervisor (with the candidate's permission), or another observer. The assessment is of the candidate's doctoral thesis or dissertation and the way in which the candidate is able to explain and defend it. In subjects where the candidate's work also includes an artefact or other practical output, such as a musical composition, arrangements are made for the examination to include assessment of this.

In professional doctorates, 'taught' modules are an integral part of the programme. Increasingly, PhD programmes include 'taught' elements, such as research methods units, or other modules that enable the candidate to acquire skills that may be necessary to the successful completion of the doctoral degree and / or useful for the next stage in the candidate's career. It is becoming more usual for some subjects / institutions to accredit optional and / or compulsory 'taught' elements successfully completed by PhD candidates during their research programme but this does not normally form part of the overall PhD assessment. In a small number of institutions taught elements need to be completed successfully before the thesis or dissertation can be submitted.

The PhD examination is not intended specifically to evaluate the skills acquired by the candidate, although it has been suggested that some skills, for example the ability to communicate orally and in writing, are an implicit part of the doctoral assessment.

Further detailed information about the UK doctoral examination process can be found in Tinkler and Jackson's 2004 publication: 'The Doctoral Examination Process'.⁵

iv) ***The assessment process for doctoral candidates in continental Europe*** is different from the process described above, and there are variations between continental countries. One of the most notable differences between the UK and the rest of Europe is that in the UK the oral examination is normally a relatively private experience involving only two or three examiners and the final outcome is not known in advance (although each examiner usually submits an independent report on the dissertation before the viva takes place); in some other countries the academic assessment of the candidate is quite separate from the oral defence of the thesis, which is sometimes a public event. For example, the written dissertation may need to

⁵ 'The Doctoral Examination Process: A handbook for students, examiners and supervisors', Penny Tinkler and Carolyn Jackson, Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press / McGraw-Hill Education, ISBN 0 – 335 – 21305 - 7, 2004.

have been approved as being of an adequate doctoral standard before permission is granted for a public 'defence' to take place. In some countries, the candidate may be invited to give one or more public lectures immediately before the (also public) 'defence of the thesis.

v) **Credit at doctoral level:** while some UK institutions accredit 'taught' modules students take as part of their doctoral training (e.g. research methods or other skills based modules), and some attach credit to all levels of professional doctorates, there is no obvious rationale for accrediting the PhD. The Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA does not include any typical credit range for the third cycle and this is welcomed by the UK.

Q10: *Are there different outcomes and assessment criteria for different doctorates? If yes, how do they differ?*

We have noted that one of the trends that is becoming apparent across the sector is that the processes for delivering research degree programmes are converging. Whereas historically there was a clear distinction between 'PhD/DPhil' and 'professional doctorates', most PhD/DPhil programmes now contain some elements of 'taught' courses, whether research-specific, personal/professional skills, credit-bearing or not. It is possible to postulate that the only essential identifiable difference of 'professional doctorates' is that the context in which the research is conducted is different, ie that the research conducted within a professional practice. Noting this convergence, we support the view that all doctorates, irrespective of type and form, should be based on a core set of processes and outcomes and therefore, assessment criteria. It is for individual institutions to decide how these are interpreted and implemented.

Q11: *Do you have any other comments about assessment criteria for doctoral qualifications and how they are applied in the examination process?*

We support the view that there should not be over-regulation of doctoral degrees, particularly with regard to accrediting the PhD and that institutional autonomy should be respected. However, given that not all researchers complete their doctorate, it is useful to consider appropriate positive exit routes to, which can be recognised by employers and further researchers' career development, such as the MPhil, Certificate of Research Methods, etc. and their corresponding outcomes and assessment criteria.

Q12: *Does your institution accredit any part of doctoral qualifications, including PhD programmes? If yes, please provide further details, including the level and amount of credit awarded.*

Other relevant (and explicit) questions are posed by Chris Park in 'Redefining the Doctorate', under the heading 'Assessment', sections (a) to (e).

Q13: *Do you think the UK can learn from continental / European assessment models for the doctorate?*

There is a wide variety of assessment models, both within Europe and beyond, eg the US and Australia. It is good practice that the UK should periodically compare outcomes, assessment criteria and other aspects of research degree programmes to ensure international comparability and to support universities in identifying opportunities for enhancing their doctoral degrees.

An important principle to maintain is that personal/professional skills development within research degrees should be researcher-centred and needs based. Any assessment of skills should be based on individual outcomes and not, for example, on accrued credits.

Q14: *Do you have experience of using independent chairs in oral examinations? If yes, please give further details.*

5 Comparability of doctoral programmes and graduates with those in continental Europe

In addition to the point immediately above concerning the assessment of doctoral candidates in continental Europe, there are other differences in practice between the UK and wider Europe, some of which are mentioned below.

At a meeting in September 2006 hosted by the UUK's Europe Unit, participants contributed to revising a draft position paper for the UK HE sector on the Bologna process and doctoral level qualifications. A final version of the paper has since been published on the Europe Unit website⁶. The paper notes the following:

i) **Entry to doctoral programmes:** As mentioned in section 2 above, in continental Europe the majority of countries require a student to have completed a master's degree before s/he is eligible to register for a doctorate.

iii) **Joint degrees:** The concept of a joint doctoral degree has at least three different interpretations:

- a qualification that involves registration by a student with two or more institutions, either consecutively or concurrently but which is awarded by only one of the institutions
- 'joint' degrees arising from subject level collaboration between two or more institutions where the award is made in the name of more than one institution. For example, the European Universities Association has developed criteria for a 'European Doctorate', partly to enable degrees to be offered jointly by institutions in different European countries.
- some European universities collaborate to provide 'co-tutelle' arrangements whereby a doctoral candidate can combine study in two countries towards one or more awards, i.e. after initial registration in his / her home country, a candidate may study for and be awarded a PhD in another European country, then return home and receive a further research award based on the same work.

⁶ UK higher education sector position paper on the Bologna process and doctoral level qualifications, 23 October 2006, at:
http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/resources/UK%20HE%20sectorpositionpaper_doctoralissues%200.doc

All the above examples require co- or joint supervision which in itself can present challenges for student support, quality assurance and skills development.

Q15: *Do you have any comments about the joint degrees described above? Are you aware of other types of joint doctoral degrees? If so, how are they different from / do they compare with the examples outlined?*

Q16: *What particular issues do you think institutions need to be aware of when developing joint doctoral degrees?*

We reproduce here our response⁷ to the EUA recommendations on the Bologna Process Third Cycle presented at the recent Ministerial conference with regard to internationalisation and mobility.

“To ensure that individual researchers undertaking multi-site [and joint] RDPs are supported, there is a need for strong co-ordinating structures and more flexible funding arrangements. There should be flexibility for institutions to develop other multi-site models to suit circumstances. The concept of the ‘European Doctorate’ is one model, which requires further development before it becomes useful.”

iv) ***The status of doctoral candidates:*** in continental Europe doctoral students are awarded the status of a member of academic staff; in the UK they have student status, providing exemption from income tax and national insurance contributions but also ineligibility for pension rights. The distinction becomes blurred when members of staff in institutions are at the same time registered for research degrees.

Q17: *What are your views about the status of doctoral candidates?*

From our experience of a national organisation interacting with providers of doctoral programmes from across Europe it is apparent that, as in the UK, the status of doctoral candidates across Europe and within individual countries is complex. For example, many countries have doctoral candidates registered both as students and as employees. Those registered as employees may not be recognised as ‘a member of academic staff’, and do not have access to similar facilities. Many ‘employees’, including those in the UK, have responsibilities to conduct research in areas outside their doctoral programme, including teaching responsibilities, and operate more as part-time research staff and part-time doctoral candidates.

Any move by the UK towards employment status for doctoral candidates would have serious implications for future funding, the ability of universities to recruit international doctoral candidates and raise the issue of the status of the increasing proportion of self-funded doctoral candidates. Furthermore, a candidate for a professional doctorate is [nearly always] by definition, already employed elsewhere.

The status of researchers touches on several important principles, recently acknowledged in the Bologna Third Cycle; those of recognising institutional autonomy, recognising the diversity of research programmes within the UK and the need to maintain flexibility.

⁷ www.grad.ac.uk/bologna

In our view the employment status of doctoral candidates is less critical than the recognition of doctoral candidates as professionals and treated accordingly, with access to appropriate facilities and support mechanisms, including personal professional and career development.

We further believe that doctoral candidates should not be disadvantaged, compared to their contemporaries in employment, by being unable to benefit from social security and state pension rights. We draw the attention of the QAA to the example of Poland⁸, which has legislated on the status for doctoral candidates that maintains their student status. This entitles them to social security benefits and ensures the period of their doctoral degree is eligible towards their pension rights and other 'employee entitlements'.

This is an aspect of research degree programmes where there is still a debate to be had by the sector and key stakeholders. It may be timely to include the status of doctoral candidates in the current discussions around the paper '*Redefining the Doctorate*'.

Finally, the House of Commons Education and Skills Select Committee has published evidence taken on 10 January 2007 on the Bologna Process⁹, which contains references to doctoral qualifications. This may be of interest in the context of the above points.

Please send your response to this paper to Gill Clarke (g.clarke@qaa.ac.uk).

QAA / 30.01.07

Revised 03.04.07, 15.04.07, 25.04.07

⁸ Law on Higher Education, Poland (2005), Article 39,
www.cepes.ro/hed/policy/legislation/pdf/Poland.pdf

⁹ House of Commons, Education and Skills Select Committee, Uncorrected oral evidence on the Bologna Process, 10 January 2007:
www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200607/cmselect/cmmeduski/uc205-i/uc20502.htm

Descriptor for qualifications at Doctoral (D) level: Doctoral degree

Doctorates are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

i the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication;

ii a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice;

iii the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems;

iv a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

a make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences;

b continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development at an advanced level, contributing substantially to the development of new techniques, ideas, or approaches;

and will have:

c the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent environments.