Policy, Regulations and Procedures for the Approval of NUI Research Degrees in the Recognised Colleges



Ollscoil na hÉireann National University of Ireland

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The National University of Ireland (NUI) is a federal university established under the Irish Universities Act 1908 and restructured under the 1997 Universities Act. NUI is a designated awarding body (DAB) named in the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 (hereafter referred to as the 2012 Act) with the authority in law to award degrees and other qualifications to linked providers.
- 1.2 NUI is also empowered under its charter and by statute to recognise other institutions of higher education, referred to as recognised colleges, and to award degrees and other qualifications in those institutions.
- 1.3 This policy refers to the awarding of research degrees in the recognised colleges. The associated regulations and procedures are intended to ensure that the recognised colleges offer high academic and student support standards in research degrees that are comparable to those in the NUI constituent universities and reflect good practice nationally and internationally.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this document is to set out the policy, regulations and procedures for institutions that are recognised colleges of NUI intending to provide academic programmes and training leading to research degrees as part of a culture and strategy for research in the institution.

3. Scope

This policy, including the regulations and procedures outlined herein, applies to:

- i. institutions that are currently recognised colleges of NUI, including those with separate awarding body status, and
- ii. institutions that wish to apply for recognised college status and intend to provide taught and research programmes leading to degrees and other qualifications of NUI.

4. General Policy Principles

- 4.1 The regulations outlined in this document apply to all research degrees awarded by NUI. (see Appendix 2) with the exception of NUI Higher Doctorate Degrees on Published Work, which are governed and administered separately.¹
- 4.2 For the most part, the policy and procedures relating to the submission of research programmes for NUI Senate validation mirror those already in place for the submission and validation of taught degree programmes.² However, there are important additional components and stipulations that are specific to research degrees, and these are set out in Sections 6 and 7.
- 4.3 The defining feature of a research degree programme is the high volume and level of independent learning involved. For programmes leading to doctoral degrees in particular, it is expected that the original research will contribute to the development of new knowledge in a chosen academic discipline, chosen area of professional practice, or on an interdisciplinary basis.
- 4.4 Institutions that offer programmes leading to NUI research degrees will be required to:
 - i. Demonstrate a culture of excellence in research, including research in the area of professional practice, aligned with their strategic objectives.
 - ii. Ensure the quality of postgraduate programmes of research and training meet the standards for the award of research degrees, at either masters or doctoral level.
 - iii. Manage a learning environment with a high-quality infrastructure to support postgraduate research students through expert and committed supervision and access to a wider research or professional practice community both nationally and internationally.
 - iv. Ensure that the quality of teaching personnel, research supervision and support is comparable to that in the constituent universities.
 - v. Ensure a robust quality assurance system is in place to underpin the provision.³

¹ NUI (2021) Degrees on Published Work awarded by the National University of Ireland: Regulations, Criteria, Guidelines and Application Procedures.

² NUI (2020) Regulations, Procedures and Guidelines for the Approval of New Programmes and Changes to Existing Programmes in the Recognised Colleges.

³ As a DAB, NUI is required to approve the QAE provision in recognised colleges that are linked providers. In the case of recognised colleges with the status of a DAB, the QAE provision is approved directly by QQI.

5. Quality Assurance

As a DAB, NUI is responsible for approving and overseeing quality assurance and enhancement (QAE) policies and procedures in operation in recognised colleges that are also linked providers of the University.⁴ These policies and procedures must include QA provisions for research degrees.⁵

6. Regulations governing approval of NUI research degrees in the recognised colleges

- 6.1 Institutions that are linked providers of NUI proposing to offer academic research programmes and training will be required to submit their regulations and procedures governing research degrees for academic review and approval by Senate.
- 6.2 A recognised college will be required to update its QA policy and procedures to incorporate the QA of its research degree provision in circumstances where it has not previously offered research degree programmes. Updated QA procedures in linked providers will be subject to approval by Senate.
- 6.3 NUI's regulations and procedures governing the approval of taught programmes will broadly apply to programmes leading to research degrees.⁶ Adapting these accordingly, NUI will seek to ensure that:
 - i. effective methods to support both the research activities and the students enrolled in research degree programmes are established and maintained, to ensure the standards and quality of the research in the recognised colleges satisfy national and international standards and requirements⁷ and are consistent with comparable programmes offered in the NUI constituent universities.

5 As a DAB, NUI is required to comprehensively review the effectiveness of the QA provision in recognised colleges that are also linked providers. This will include the effectiveness of QA procedures in relation to research degrees. NUI's QA procedures are based on a QQI statutory guidelines that provide a framework for the review of the QA provision. See QQI (2019) <u>Statutory Guidelines for the Review of Linked Providers by the National University of</u> *Ireland*.

⁴ Where a recognised college is also a designated awarding body under the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, the responsibility for approval of its quality assurance procedures lies directly with QQI.

⁶ NUI (2020) Regulations, Procedures and Guidelines for the Approval of New Programmes and Changes to Existing Programmes in the Recognised Colleges, p.11.

⁷ QQI (2019) Ireland's Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes.

- ii. the marks and standards governing research degree programmes are robust and consistent with those in the NUI constituent universities and benchmarked appropriately to the NFQ.
- iii. all programmes leading to research degrees in the recognised colleges are subject to appropriate external and independent academic review.
- iv. proposals for the introduction of new research degrees are supported with a range of documentation to be submitted to the Registrar before a recommendation for approval is made to NUI Senate.
- NUI will establish appropriate timelines with the recognised college to facilitate each stage of the review process prior to approval. Institutions must be cognisant of the timeframe required for the design, review and approval of a programme, through the NUI Senate, before it is offered formally to students. As stipulated in existing NUI policy, the timeframe for the approval of research programmes is 12 months.⁸
- 6.4 Recognised colleges are required to:
 - i. publish academic regulations for all research degrees offered, and
 - ii. put in place clearly defined structures covering all academic matters relating to the progress and assessment of students on programmes leading to research degrees. These include, but are not limited to, robust supervisory arrangements, monitoring of progress against specific criteria and benchmarks, and appropriate examination arrangements for all research degrees.
- 6.5 All research degree provision offered in the recognised colleges will be aligned with the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), ensuring that the programme learning outcomes linked to taught module components are consistent with national and published NFQ Awards Standards at Level 9 for master's degrees and Level 10 for doctoral degrees, including professional doctorate degrees.

7. Proposals to offer NUI research degrees: Procedures for approval by Senate

7.1 Procedures for the external review of submissions

- i. Proposals for new research degrees must include a brief summary of the structures and standards in place in the institution to support the application in question and include relevant and appropriate links and references. (See Appendix 1.)
- ii. Where taught modules are included in a research degree programme and lead to additional minor, special purpose or supplemental NUI qualifications these will require approval for use either as part of the research degree programme or as an additional component to the programme. Stand-alone modules that do not lead to NUI qualifications do not require Senate approval.
- iii. Taught components (typically < 60 ECTS) leading to a separate qualification, will require the support of an extern assessor who is expert in the relevant discipline area. The extern assessor can be (i) appointed independently by the institution or (ii) acting as an extern examiner appointed by NUI for an existing programme in a related discipline area in the institution.⁹
- iv. NUI will schedule an independent academic peer review of the proposed degree programme and will seek to ensure that the final panel composition is in line with sectoral expectations on equality, diversity and inclusion, including but not limited to gender balance.
- v. The review will be undertaken by a panel of no fewer than two and no more than three members, all of whom will be independent of the institution, with verification of no known conflicts of interest.

⁹ For full information on the procedures for approving short programmes, see <u>NUI's Regulations</u>, <u>Procedures</u> and <u>Guidelines</u> for the Approval of New Programmes and Changes to Existing Programmes in the Recognised <u>Colleges</u>, p.13.

- vi. The review panel will be appointed by NUI and will be chaired by a senior academic, independent of any NUI member institutions, with significant experience and expertise in programmes and training, preferably at an international level, leading to research degrees. The second panel member will be a senior and experienced academic in the area of research, who may be affiliated with an Irish university (including, but not necessarily, an NUI member institution). Where relevant, a third panel member with experience of professional practice may also be appointed. The institution will appoint one of the panel members and NUI will appoint the other panel member(s). NUI will ensure the institution is in agreement regarding the panel composition.
- vii. For some professional research degrees, participation by professional, regulatory, or statutory bodies may be integral to the accreditation process. In such cases, the recognised college must demonstrate institutional oversight relating to the professional and/or statutory body.
- viii. All programmes leading to NUI research degrees, and to be delivered jointly with collaborative partners, are subject to the same approval process as those to be delivered entirely by the recognised college.¹⁰

7.2 Senate Approval

In cases where a proposal to offer a new research degree has satisfactorily undergone an external review and a set of recommendations have been made, the Senate may:

- Approve in full.
- Approve subject to the fulfilment of certain conditions. Conditions are requirements that must be met by the recognised college prior to the admission of a student onto the research programme.
- Approve subject to minor amendments to be completed as soon as possible and suggested recommendations for improvement which should be considered by the recognised college at its discretion.
- Withhold approval pending further consultation with the recognised college.

¹⁰ Recognised colleges should refer to the following for guidance: NUI (2013) Quality Assurance for Collaborative and Transnational Provision of Academic Programmes Leading to NUI Qualifications and QQI (2012) Policy for Collaborative Programmes, Transnational Programmes and Joint Awards.

7.3 Launching a new research degree programme

- i. The NUI Registrar will inform the head of the recognised college, in writing, of the Senate's decision regarding the approval to offer a new research degree.
- ii. The recognised college will submit final programme documentation (incorporating any proposed amendments) to the NUI Registrar within an agreed timeframe.
- iii. A start-date for the research programme will be confirmed.
- iv. A periodic review of the research programme leading to the NUI research degree will be provisionally scheduled within the first five years of the programme.¹¹

¹¹ Please see NUI (2019) Guidelines, Criteria and Procedures for the Periodic Review of Programmes Leading to NUI Degrees and Other Qualifications in the Recognised Colleges.

Appendix 1: Application for approval of a research degree of NUI in a recognised college

1. Recognised colleges should be familiar with developments in research education and training in Ireland and adopt a framework of good practice for research provision that is comparable to the NUI constituent universities and in line with the wider higher education sector. This will also be reflected in the QAE of their research provision. In particular, recognised colleges should refer to the following for guidance:

HEA (2015) National Framework for Doctoral Education

QQI (2017) <u>Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI</u> for Providers of Research Degree Programmes

QQI (2019) Ireland's Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes

2. The proposal document regarding the introduction of a research degree in a recognised college will include a summary of the structures and standards in place in the institution to support the application in question and include relevant and appropriate links and references.

The following headings may be useful as a starting point and indicate the range of areas that should be addressed in the proposal. They are adapted from QQI's (2019) *Ireland's Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes*. Depending on the discipline area of the research degree programme it may be necessary to widen the scope and include other criteria¹². The list below is neither prescriptive nor exhaustive:

- i. Institutional Organisation and Research Environment (academic environment; infrastructure; institutional structures and resources)
- ii. Research Community and, where relevant, Professional Practice Community (introduction to community, expectations and disciplinary norms; induction and communication within the HEI)
- The Student (information for potential applicants, recruitment/ admissions, student diversity; diversity of engagement; clarity on student role)

12 See QQI (2012) Research Degree Programme Policy and Criteria.

- iv. The Project/Dissertation
- v. Supervision and Supervisor(s) (qualified, competent and accessible; support and monitoring for timely progress and completion; preparation for submission)
- vi. Researcher Development (guidance and planning; provision of opportunities for development, QA mechanisms and recognition of attainment)
- vii. The Examination Process (examination, examiners, oral examination, assessment outcomes and revisions)
- viii. Data Records and Reporting on the Doctoral Programme.

The application should also include appendices detailing the academic regulations governing research degrees in the institution with links to all relevant policies, procedures and guidelines to each specific research degree being offered.

3. Where taught modules of a research degree lead to additional minor, special purpose or supplemental awards these will need to be approved for use either as part of the research degree programme or as an additional component to the programme.¹³

¹³ Please refer to NUI's <u>Regulations</u>, <u>Procedures and Guidelines for the Approval of New Programmes and Changes</u> to Existing Programmes in the <u>Recognised Colleges</u> for further details.

Appendix 2: Types of Research Degrees awarded by NUI

The following table sets out the different types of research degree provision that are currently offered in NUI's member institutions:

Type of Programme	NFQ Level	Leading to NUI Research Degree	Short Title	Typical Duration (Academic years)
Research masters programme	9	Master of Research	MRes MPhil	 1-2 years FT (3-6 trimesters) 15 months to 3 years PT (5-9 trimesters)
Doctoral programmes	10	Doctor of Philosophy	PhD	Typically, 2 stages over 3 to 4 years (9-12 trimesters) FT, or 5 to 6 years (15-18 trimesters), PT
				Stage 1: 'PhD Track'
				an initial period of advanced education, training and research
				 1-1.5 years (up to 5 trimesters) FT
				 1.5-2.5 years (up to 7 trimesters) PT

Type of Programme	NFQ Level	Leading to NUI Research Degree	Short Title	Typical Duration (Academic years)
Doctoral				Stage 2:
programmes				Main focus on original doctoral research but may also include further advanced education, research and generic training.
				 2.5-3 years (up to 12 trimesters) FT
				 3.5-4.5 years (up to 18 trimesters)
		Doctor of Midwifery	DM	 Minimum of 3-4 years FT (9- 12 trimesters)
		Doctor of Nursing	DN	 Minimum of 5-6 years PT (15-18 trimesters)
	10	Doctor of Philosophy by - Publication - Prior Publication - Published Work	PhD	Minimum of 1 year FT (3 trimesters or 2 years PT (6 trimesters) depending on research experience through published scholarly material.

Type of Programme	NFQ Level	Leading to NUI Research Degree	Short Title	Typical Duration (Academic years)
Professional doctoral programme	10			 Range from 3-4 years FT (9- 12 trimesters) to 6 years PT (18 trimesters)
		Doctorate in Governance	DGov	 4-6 years PT (12-18 trimesters)
		Doctor of Educational Psychology	DEdPsych	 3 years FT (9 trimesters)
				 5 years PT (15 trimesters)
		Doctor of Clinical Psychology	DPsych	 3 years FT (9 trimesters)
		Doctor of Veterinary Medical Specialisation	DVMS	 3-4 years FT (9- 12 trimesters)
		Doctorate in Nursing/ Physiotherapy/ Pharmacy/ Positive Health Science	DNurs/ DPhysio/ DPharm/ DPosHealthSci	3 years FT
Practice- based doctoral Programme	10	Doctor of Medicine	MD	 2 years FT (6 trimesters)
		Doctor of Medicine by	MD	 4 years PT (12 trimesters)
		Prior Publication		 Minimum of 1 year, up to 3 years FT

Appendix 3: Proposal Review Process

1. Guidelines and Criteria for the Appointment of a Panel

- 1.1 All programmes leading to NUI research degrees in the recognised colleges are subject to appropriate external and independent academic review.
- 1.2 NUI will schedule an independent academic peer review, which will be undertaken by a review panel.
- 1.3 The review panel will comprise two or three members (inclusive of the Chairperson). The Chairperson will be nominated by NUI and will be external to and independent of any of the member institutions of the NUI. The institution will nominate one panel member, subject to the criteria set out in section 2; NUI will nominate a third panel member, if necessary, and subject to the criteria set out in Section 2.
- 1.4 The review panel will be appointed by NUI and will be composed of peer reviewers who are senior academic leaders from comparable third-level academic institutions and/or, in some cases, from the leadership of external organisations such as professional bodies or business/industry.
- 1.5 The recognised college will have the opportunity to comment on the proposed review panel to ensure there are no potential conflicts of interest. NUI will ensure that there is agreement on the panel composition.

2. Criteria for the Appointment of Panel Members¹⁴

- 2.1 A panel member should be a specialist in the relevant field of study, have appropriate academic standing and expertise, and sufficient university experience to adjudicate on comparability of standards for research degrees, unless selected for professional or industry expertise and experience.
- 2.2 A panel member should not normally be appointed from a School/ Department where a member of staff in that School/Department is currently serving as an extern examiner for taught or research degrees in NUI recognised colleges.

- 2.3 A panel member should not be appointed if their impartiality could be called into question through any foreseen possibility of conflict of interest.
- 2.4 A potential panel member who has retired, but who remains active in academic life and continues to engage in teaching, research or other academic activities relevant to the research degree programme under review, is eligible for appointment to the review panel.
- 2.5 The review panel as a whole should reflect the sectoral expectations on equality, diversity and inclusion, including but not limited to gender balance.¹⁵

3. The Role and Responsibilities of the Review Panel

- 3.1 The main role of the Review Panel is to independently assess if the academic programme and/or training leading to an NUI research degree is consistent with the culture and strategy for research in the recognised college and comparable to equivalent standards in the sector.
- 3.2 The Panel is appointed by the University to make recommendations to Senate in respect of new research degree programmes proposed by the Recognised College.
- 3.3 The Panel will be provided with the relevant documentation, including material submitted by the Recognised College, on the proposed academic programme and training leading to an NUI research degree. The NUI will issue guidelines in respect of the report.
- 3.4 The Panel will be invited to comment on any aspect of the research degree proposal document which should address the key areas (as detailed in Appendix 1) consistent with good practice for research degree programmes.
- 3.5 The Panel will be required to report their findings and recommendations regarding the approval of new research degree programmes to the NUI Registrar for consideration and recommendation to the NUI Senate.

¹⁵ NUI is committed to ensuring that the principles of equality, diversity and inclusion are articulated in the strategies of the NUI Recognised Colleges and are in line with sectoral expectations and reflective of national guidelines. Further information on developments in the university sector are available on the IUA website – https://www.iua.ie/ourvork/diversity-equality/.

4. The Report of the Review Panel

- 4.1 As part of the review process, the Panel is invited to submit a detailed report outlining the findings and make recommendations to NUI regarding the approval of the research degree programme.
- 4.2 Where the panel has specific queries in respect of the programme, NUI will seek further information from relevant personnel in the Recognised College proposing the degree.
- 4.3 Suggested criteria for the report will focus on the guiding principles for the national framework for good practice established for research degree programmes in Ireland.¹⁶
- 4.4 The final report of the Panel will be circulated to representatives in the Recognised College to allow for any issues raised to be addressed before a recommendation is made to Senate by the NUI Registrar.
- 4.5 It should be noted that the Panel report may be:
 - Subject to the Irish Freedom of Information Act, 2014¹⁷ and that, accordingly, any person named in the report will be entitled to have access to it.
 - Used as part of the University's processes of quality audit and quality assessment.
 - Subject to the Irish Data Protection Act, 2018¹⁸ and the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Regulation (EU) 2016/679). Please refer to NUI's general Data Protection Policy.¹⁹

¹⁶ Details on the guiding principles for good practice in research degree programmes in Ireland are available in the following publications: HEA (2015), <u>National Framework for Doctoral Education</u> and QQI (2019), <u>Ireland's Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes</u>.

¹⁷ Freedom of Information Act, 2014

¹⁸ Data Protection Act, 2018

¹⁹ NUI (2018) *Data Protection Policy*.

Appendix 4: Guidelines for the award level and award-type assigned to NUI qualifications in the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ)

The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) was established in 2003 and is a single structure mechanism for recognising all education and training in Ireland. The framework comprises ten levels, based on nationally agreed standards of knowledge, skill and competence and includes different classes or categories of awards/qualifications. The NFQ, whilst a national development, is also linked to similar initiatives that show how qualifications, or qualification levels, can be compared in other similar systems. Over 150 countries are now developing, or have developed, a national qualifications framework.²⁰

1. Award level descriptors assigned to NUI qualifications in the NFQ²¹

Level 9: Master's degree/Postgraduate Diploma/Postgraduate Certificate

Learning outcomes at this level relate to the demonstration of knowledge and understanding which is the forefront of a field of learning. The outcomes relate to the application of knowledge, understanding and problem-solving abilities in new or unfamiliar contexts related to field of study. The outcomes are associated with an ability to integrate knowledge, handle complexity and formulate judgments. Outcomes associated with this level would link with employment as a senior professional or manager with responsibility for the work outputs of teams.

Level 10: Doctoral degrees

Learning Outcomes at this level relate to the discovery and development of new knowledge and skills and delivering findings at the frontiers of knowledge and application. Further outcomes at this level relate to specialist skills and transferable skills required for managing such as the abilities to critique and develop organisational structures and initiate change.

²⁰ Ireland's national quality and qualifications agency, QQI, provides further information on the NFQ.

²¹ NQAI (2003) Outline National Framework of Qualifications – Determinations made by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, pp.20-21.

- 2. Award-type Descriptors contained in the NFQ which have been agreed between the universities and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI)
 - i. **Major Awards** are the principle class of awards made at each level, e.g., Honours Bachelor degree (NFQ: Level 8) or Master's degree (NFQ: Level 9). The learning outcomes associated with these major award-types include many of the sub-strands of knowledge, skills and competence appropriate to the level and should be coherently planned to meet the aims and objectives of the award. Awards of a major-award type will provide learners with the options of (i) progressing to higher-level awards, (ii) transferring to other awards at the same level or (iii) gaining direct transition to employment.

Note: Where a major award is offered at an exit point, e.g. Postgraduate Diploma when exiting a Master's degree, then a separate set of learning outcomes should be included for this programme.

- ii. **Minor Awards** provide recognition for learners who achieve a range of learning outcomes but not the specific combination of volume of learning outcomes required for a major award. The associated learning outcomes of these awards form a component part of the learning outcomes of a major award.
- iii. **Special Purpose Awards** are stand-alone awards and recognise a specific or relatively narrow range of learning outcomes.
- iv. Supplemental Awards recognise learning that is additional to a major award and could, for example, relate to the updating of knowledge or skills, or to continuing professional development.

Appendix 5: References

European Commission (2015) ECTS Users' Guide.

ENQA/European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2015) <u>Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher</u> <u>Education Area</u>.

HEA/Higher Education Authority (2015) National Framework for Doctoral Education.

NUI/National University of Ireland (2019) <u>Guidelines, Criteria and Procedures</u> for the Periodic Review of Programmes Leading to NUI Degrees and Other Qualifications in the Recognised Colleges.

NUI (2020) <u>Regulations, Procedures and Guidelines for the Approval of New</u> Programmes and Changes to Existing Programmes in the Recognised Colleges.

NUI (2021) <u>Degrees on Published Work awarded by the National University</u> of Ireland: Regulations, Criteria, Guidelines and Application Procedures.

NQAI/National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (2003) <u>Outline National</u> Framework of Qualifications – Determinations made by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland.

QQI/Quality and Qualifications Ireland (2012) <u>Policy for Collaborative</u> Programmes, Transnational Programmes and Joint Awards.

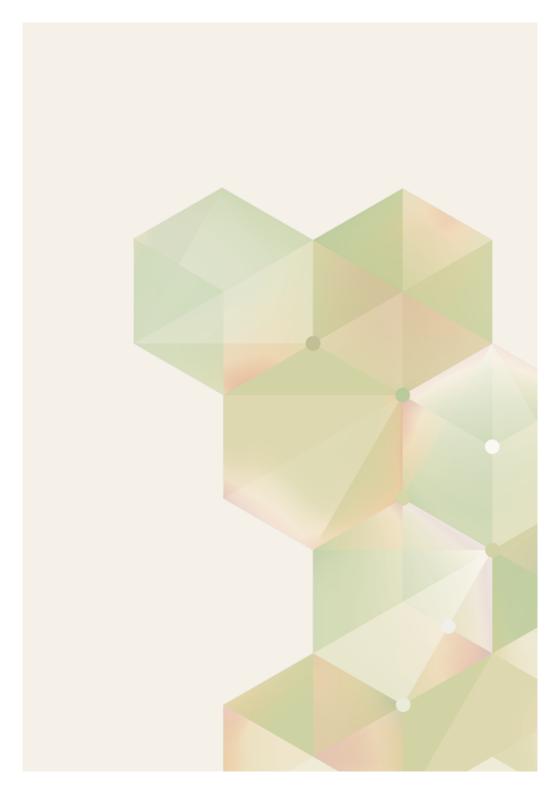
QQI (2012) Research Degree Programme Policy and Criteria.

QQI (2017) <u>Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for</u> Providers of Research Degree Programmes.

QQI (2019) <u>Statutory Guidelines for the Review of Linked Providers by the</u> National University of Ireland.

QQI (2019) Ireland's Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes.

QQI (2021) <u>Roles, Responsibilities and Code of Conduct for Reviewers</u> and Evaluators.





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