



Guidance on applications for the grant of research degree awarding powers: Academic staff (Criterion 1)

February 2014

Introduction

Under current arrangements, higher education providers in Scotland and Northern Ireland may apply for research degree awarding powers in accordance with guidance issued in October 1999 [Applications for the grant of taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers and university title](#)¹, which applied UK-wide.

In England and Wales, higher education providers may apply for research degree awarding powers, in accordance with guidance issued in 2004 [Applications for the grant of taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers and university title: Guidance for applicant organisations in England and Wales](#)² (the **Guidance**).

The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) will be updating the 2004 Guidance in 2014. In the meantime, this QAA note of guidance, which is intended to assist applicants in their preparations for research degree awarding powers, focuses on Criterion 1, relating to academic staff, and should be read in conjunction with the existing **Guidance**.

Applicants intending to submit a research degree awarding powers application should complete the data table at [Annex 1](#) and submit this at the time of application.

The Doctoral degree descriptor can be found at [Annex 2](#) and is included here as a useful reference point for applicants given the staffing and research support implications involved.

Guidance and criteria for research degree awarding powers

The **Guidance** indicates that an organisation seeking research degree awarding powers must have first secured taught degree awarding powers, although applicants may request both sets of powers to be processed simultaneously.

In considering an application for research degree awarding powers alone, evidence will be sought that the applicant continues to satisfy the criteria governing the grant of taught degree awarding powers and is exercising appropriate stewardship of such powers. The first section of the critical self-analysis should therefore reflect on its stewardship of taught degree awarding powers, thereby helping to place the research degree awarding powers application in context.

The **Guidance** sets out the criteria, provides an explanation and indicates evidence requirements to be met for the purposes of research degree awarding powers. These broadly relate to: academic staff; satisfying national guidance relating to the award of research degrees; and achievement of a minimum number of Doctor of Philosophy conferments.

¹ QAA (1999) *Applications for the grant of taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers and university title*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/AboutUs/DAP/guidance/Pages/RDAP-guidance-criteria.aspx.

² BIS (2004) *Applications for the grant of taught degree awarding powers, research degree awarding powers and university title: Guidance for applicant organisations in England and Wales*, available at: www.gov.uk/government/publications/applying-for-powers-to-award-taught-degrees-research-degrees-and-university-title.

Criterion 1: Academic staff

The creation and interpretation of knowledge which extends a discipline, usually through original research, is a defining characteristic of the UK doctorate. Academic staff involved in the delivery of research degrees are expected to have knowledge, understanding and experience of research and advanced scholarship, that goes well beyond maintaining the 'close and professional understanding of current developments in research and scholarship in their subjects' required for staff engaged in the delivery of taught degrees. **Criterion 1** reflects this expectation and sets out the need for research student supervision, and any doctoral level teaching undertaken, to be informed by a high level of professional knowledge of current research and advanced scholarly activity in the subjects offered by a provider.

The **Explanation** associated with the Criterion reads as follows:

The award of degrees that recognise the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other forms of advanced scholarship, places a particular and substantial responsibility upon an awarding body. The organisation's academic staff should accordingly command the respect and confidence of their academic peers across the higher education sector as being worthy to deliver research degree programmes. Organisations wishing to offer research degrees should have in place a strong underpinning culture that actively encourages and supports creative, high-quality research and scholarship amongst the organisation's academic staff and its doctoral and other research students.

The **Explanation** is not only an explanation but also a development of the Criterion, offering a definition of both research and all forms of advanced scholarship, as involving the creation and interpretation of new knowledge. Applicants should be aware that numeric criteria contribute to a broader assessment of their capacity to assume the 'particular and substantial responsibility' associated with research degree awarding powers, and the need for academic staff as a whole to enjoy 'the respect and confidence' of academic peers across the sector necessarily involves an evaluative dimension. Applicants should therefore demonstrate research and advanced scholarship achievement/output among its academic staff.

The use of 'across' suggests that the respect and confidence involved must relate to the staff of both research-intensive and teaching-led institutions. It is recognised that this may be difficult to demonstrate, but QAA will be interested in the links (formal and informal) that exist between applicants and other higher education providers, including joint research activities; the applicant's range of external examiners (and the comments contained in their reports); the range of organisations where the applicant's academic staff serve as external examiners or advisers (which, in relation to the Explanation, though not the Metric, need not be research-related); research performance in external peer reviews (for example, Research Assessment Exercise/Research Excellence Framework); awards of distinction; and the nature and spread of disciplines.

The **Explanation** also draws attention to the importance of an organisation having 'a strong underpinning culture' encouraging and supporting high-quality research and scholarship among academic staff and its research students. Such a culture typically involves exposure to a range of discipline-based and research-active communities and is in keeping with an 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...[which] offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes

from their research degrees'.³ QAA will therefore wish to be assured that an applicant has a strong and sustainable research culture, which directly informs and enhances the supervision and teaching of research degree students.

In establishing the nature of the culture that exists within an applicant, QAA will be interested in the following.

- An applicant's definitions of 'research' (recognising the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) definition of research as 'original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding', 'scholarship' and/or 'advanced scholarship'). Applicants should be aware that dissemination or transfer activities which do not involve the creation of knowledge are likely to be scrutinised closely.
- The extent to which staff involved in the delivery of research degree programmes, in a teaching and/or supervisory capacity, are themselves active researchers.
- Staff perceptions of research and intellectual enquiry, and the extent to which there is evidence of a spirit of enquiry and critique, and research is taken seriously and valued across the organisation.
- The extent to which there is a critical mass of research staff and students, representing a viable research community internally, promoting active engagement in discipline-based and broader based communities of researchers and scholars external to the organisation.
- The way in which research culture contributes (directly or indirectly) to teaching and learning; the support and encouragement of research students; and to the enhancement of the thesis, and any assessed work which precedes it.
- Policies and procedures relating to research and advanced scholarship are understood and applied consistently, both by those involved in the delivery of research degrees and, where appropriate, by the students also involved.
- An applicant's success in developing research; research trajectory; attitude towards research in any areas which are not flagged as research-active.
- The profile of research professors, what they do, how they are monitored and evidence that they successfully support research development.
- What academic contracts of employment have to say about research and the relationship between human resources policy and practice.

Criterion 1: Evidence requirements

It is the responsibility of the applicant to establish for itself and to demonstrate that a staff member meets the metric requirements for research degree awarding powers. An applicant should be able to demonstrate strength and depth in its research supervision capacity including, as appropriate, reference to its research performance in authoritative external peer reviews and demonstrable involvement in research-related activities with other higher education institutions, or comparable organisations, engaged in research.

QAA will be interested in the means used by an applicant to verify its staff data analysis, including the extent to which the data have been subject to external scrutiny. Where the research-related activities of higher education providers are significantly enhanced by the contributions of staff on fractional contracts, applicants should include a separate analysis of the performance of the staff involved. Other than in respect of the RAE/REF and equivalent exercises, where the most recent submission will be accepted, data should be provided for the three years immediately preceding the submission of an application for research degree awarding powers.

³ QAA (2012) UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Chapter B11: *Research degrees*, available at: www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/quality-code-B11.aspx.

An applicant will be required to provide evidence demonstrating that the staff involved with the delivery of its research degree programmes, have:

substantial relevant knowledge, understanding and experience of both current research and advanced scholarship in their discipline area and that such knowledge, understanding and experience directly inform and enhance their supervision and teaching.

This requirement involves an extension of the criterion from knowledge of current research and advanced scholarly activity, to understanding and experience of it. While there is room for debate as to the relationship between knowledge and understanding, experience introduces a significant new dimension. This seems reasonable, for knowledge, or even knowledge and understanding, alone would demand no more of the staff involved with research degree supervision than of their counterparts in applicants seeking only taught degree awarding powers. In the case of applicants seeking research degree awarding powers, therefore, all staff acting as teachers, or supervisors, of research degree students are expected to be active researchers, demonstrated in most cases by public output. An absence of public output would invite detailed investigation, particularly if it was applied to more than a very small minority of staff.

An applicant is also required to demonstrate evidence that it has in place:

staff development and appraisal opportunities aimed at enabling academic staff to develop and enhance their knowledge of current research and advanced scholarship.

Applicants should therefore expect questions about the funding and staff development in place to nurture research, and incentives in place to encourage research (for example promotions, prizes, study leave, teaching relief).

The Metric Tests

Metric test 1 requires an applicant to provide evidence that:

a significant proportion (normally around a half as a minimum) of its full-time academic staff are active and recognised contributors to subject associations, learned societies and relevant professional bodies.

These three overlapping categories reflect recognised extra-institutional organisations with a discipline (or profession) based research function. The reference to 'active and recognised contributors' suggests that passive membership is not likely to count. QAA will therefore require evidence of some form of public output or outcome, broadly defined, demonstrating the research-related impact of academic staff on their discipline or sphere of research activity at a regional, national or international level.

Applicants drawing on other staff who contribute to their research agenda may include relevant information using templates provided by QAA (attached as an annex to this note of guidance).

Metric test 2 requires an applicant to provide evidence that:

a significant proportion (normally around a third as a minimum) of its academic staff have recent (that is, within the past three years) personal experience of research activity in other UK or international university institutions by, for example, acting as

external examiners for research degrees, serving as validation/review panel members, or contributing to collaborative research projects with other organisations.

Here the test applies to all academic staff (fractional as well as full-time) whether involved in research degree supervision or not. It is reasonable to read university institutions as higher education or specialist research institutions, allowing for the possibility that the latter may include prestigious private sector bodies.

The second example (serving as validation/review panel members) makes no reference to research relevance and has been interpreted by some applicant institutions as extending to staff who may be research inactive, but who have been panel members for undergraduate degrees (even, in some cases, when acting on behalf of a professional body with no research remit). This is unlikely to meet the intention of the test, and, other than in quite exceptional cases, applicants must demonstrate both that the activity has taken place and that it meets the governing requirement of personal experience of research activity in other UK or international [higher education or specialist research] institutions.

The test itself appears to relate to the respect and confidence requirement. Whether or not the activity concerned meets this criterion is, therefore, a touchstone for acceptability. This necessitates the exclusion of most professional activities, consultancies and the like, unless there is evidence that they involve research as previously defined. For this reason, because the metric applies to all academic staff (fractional as well as full-time), applicants should include separate data on full-time and fractional staff, since the inclusion of the latter, while potentially beneficial to some institutions in respect of Metric 1, is potentially distortional here; accordingly the Advisory Committee on Degree Awarding Powers would wish to have double datasets where this appears to be the case.

Metric test 3 requires an applicant to provide evidence that:

a significant proportion (normally around a third as a minimum) of its academic staff who are engaged in research or other forms of advanced scholarship, can demonstrate achievements that are recognised by the wider academic community to be of national and/or international standing (e.g. as indicated by authoritative external peer reviews).

The wording 'recognised by the wider academic community to be of national and/or international standing (e.g. as indicated by authoritative external peer reviews)' is a direct reference to exercises such as the research assessment exercise/research excellence framework (RAE/REF), but it does not follow that the RAE/REF should necessarily be privileged over other forms of evidence which applicants may wish to submit. Nor does the metric necessarily refer to the applicant's RAE/REF submission, since this may have been dictated by other considerations resulting in the exclusion of staff who meet the criterion; equally, the wording should not be read as precluding the submission of staff on the basis of other peer reviewed activities, to which the applicant may wish to draw attention.

Applicants should interpret the metric as applying to all full-time academic staff, producing a second dataset where its research profile is significantly enhanced by the existence of fractional staff of 0.5 FTE or above.

Applicants may wish to make an alternative case in respect of the research performance of staff not included in RAE/REF activity based, for example, on evidence from the views of externals involved in assessment activity preceding final submissions to the RAE/REF, major prizes, invited master classes, research contracts or publications too late for submission. However, the phrase '(e.g. as indicated by authoritative external peer reviews)' suggests that an unsupported claim by an applicant will not be accepted without

investigation. It should be stressed that demonstrating that a staff member meets the metric requirement is the responsibility of the applicant and should not be a cause of prolonged investigation for a scrutiny team. For example, rather than simply presenting non-annotated staff CVs, they should point to the evidence to be derived from them.

Annex 1: Research degree awarding powers (RDAP) data table to be completed by applicants and submitted at the time of application

Demographics

Data to be provided by the applicant organisation	Notes
Student numbers - full-time equivalent (FTE)	
Research student numbers - FTE	
Number of students who are also members of staff	
The above figure as a percentage of total student FTE	
Number of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) completions	
Numbers of PhD students to have completed successfully in each of the last three academic years	
Number of the above externally funded on competitive basis	
Numbers of academic units to have PhD students	
Range and median numbers of PhD students in these academic units	
Number of full-time/fractional academic staff and FTE	
Number and proportion of full-time academic staff with PhDs	
Number and proportion of full-time academic staff with PhD supervisory experience	
Number and proportion of full-time academic staff internally approved to supervise PhDs	
Number of professors	
Maximum PhD supervisory load of academic staff (by head count and FTE)	
Numbers of supervisors in the last three academic years whose load has exceeded this figure	
Academic areas not currently permitted to supervise PhD students (a) numerically and (b) as a percentage of the whole	

RDAP-relevant research information

Data to be provided by the applicant organisation	Notes
Latest RAE/REF results	
Number of units of assessment and numbers/proportion of academic staff entered in RAE/REF	
Amount of Research Council funding in the three year period to commencement of scrutiny	
Amount of quality-related (RAE/REF) funding in each of the last three academic years preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Amount of other forms of research funding (broadly defined to include knowledge transfer consultancies) received in each of the three years preceding the submission of an RDAP application	

Information about staff

Test 1: Professional affiliations of full-time staff

You must be able to demonstrate that a significant proportion (normally around a half as a minimum) of your full-time academic staff are active and recognised contributors to subject associations, learned societies and relevant professional bodies.

Data to be provided by the applicant organisation	Notes
Number and proportion of full-time academic staff who are active and recognised contributors to professional associations, learned societies or subject associations (data should be provided for the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application)	

Test 2: Research activity of full-time staff

You must be able to demonstrate that a significant proportion (normally around a third as a minimum) of your full-time academic staff have recent (within the past three years) personal experience of research activity in other UK or international university institutions, for example, by acting as external examiners for research degrees, serving as validation/review panel members, or contributing to collaborative research projects with other organisations.

Data to be provided by the applicant organisation	Notes
Number and proportion of full-time academic staff who have engaged in collaborative research with counterparts in another UK higher education institution in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of full-time academic staff who have contributed to the approval or review of research or research supervisory provision in another UK higher education institution in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of full-time academic staff with experience of external examining research degrees in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	

Test 3: Academic achievements of full-time staff

A significant proportion (normally around a third as a minimum) of your full-time academic staff who are engaged in research or other forms of advanced scholarship must be able to demonstrate achievements that are recognised by the wider academic community to be of national and/or international standing (typically, achievements testified by authoritative external peer reviews).

Data to be provided by the applicant organisation	Notes
Number and proportion of full-time academic staff who have published journal articles in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of full-time academic staff who have delivered invited/keynote conference papers or public lectures in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of full-time academic staff who have published or otherwise produced other public/professional outputs in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of full-time academic staff who have organised national/international conferences in the three year years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of full-time academic staff who have done none of the above in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of full-time academic staff either entered in the latest RAE/REF or with external confirmation of their eligibility	
The proportion of approved supervisors (full-time academic staff) of PhD students who meet the above criterion	

Number and proportion of full-time academic staff who have been editors or members of editorial boards of peer review journals in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
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Test 4: Credentials of part-time staff

Where part-time (fractional) staff contribute significantly to an applicant organisation's research-related activities, the organisation is invited to submit a separate analysis relating to its fractional staff as follows.

Data to be provided by the applicant organisation	Notes
Number and proportion of fractional academic staff who are active and recognised contributors to professional associations, learned societies or subject associations (data should be provided for the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application)	
Number and proportion of fractional academic staff who have engaged in collaborative research with counterparts in another UK higher education institution in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of fractional academic staff who have contributed to the approval or review of research or research supervisory provision in another UK higher education institution in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of fractional academic staff with experience of externally examining research degrees in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of fractional academic staff who have published journal articles in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of fractional academic staff who have delivered invited/keynote conference papers or public lectures in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of fractional academic staff who have published or otherwise produced other public/professional outputs in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of fractional academic staff who have organised national/international conferences in the three year years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of fractional academic staff who have done none of the above in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	
Number and proportion of fractional academic staff either entered in RAE 2008 or with external confirmation of their eligibility	
The proportion of approved supervisors (fractional academic staff) of PhD students whose achievements are recognised by the wider academic community to be of national and/or international standing (typically, achievements testified by authoritative external peer reviews)	
Number and proportion of fractional academic staff who have been editors or members of editorial boards of peer review journals in the three years immediately preceding the submission of an RDAP application	

Annex 2: Qualification descriptor - doctoral degrees

Qualification descriptors in the Quality Code explain the outcomes and attributes expected of learning at doctoral level and provide a helpful starting point in considering the staffing implications involved.

The Quality Code states that doctoral degrees are awarded for the creation and interpretation, construction and/or exposition of knowledge which extends the forefront of a discipline, usually through original research. It sets out the expectation that holders of doctoral degrees:

will be able to conceptualise, design and implement projects for the generation of significant new knowledge and/or understanding. Holders of doctoral degrees will have the qualities needed for employment that require both the ability to make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields and an innovative approach to tackling and solving problems...Professional doctorates aim to develop an individual's professional practice and to support them in producing a contribution to (professional) knowledge.

Level 8 Descriptor: Doctoral degree		
Doctoral degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:	Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:	Holders will have:
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	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	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
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	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	
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 light of unforeseen problems		
a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry		

QAA621 - Feb 14

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Registered charity numbers 1062746 and SC037786