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Issues paper

This report is for information

This document is the first annual publication of research degree qualification rates for individual higher education institutions in England. No action is required in response.

Research degree qualification rates

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1999-2000 – 2005-06

To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions
Of interest to those responsible for	Research management, Supervising and managing research degree programmes, Quality assurance
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Executive summary

Purpose

1. This document is produced for information. It is the first annual publication of research degree qualification rates for individual higher education institutions (HEIs) in England. Research degree programmes are all doctorate degrees mainly by research.

Key points

2. This publication fulfils our previous undertaking to publish qualification rates as set out in HEFCE Circular letter 10/2006. We anticipate this information will be of interest to HEIs and others interested in the quality of research programmes.

3. The qualification rates in this report are derived from data submitted to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for the years 1999-2000 to 2005-06. Tables P1 and P2 show the number of home and overseas research degree programme students that received their qualification during this time period. Each individual HEI's rate is compared with a sector adjusted average.

Action required

4. This document is for information only.

Background

Purpose of qualification rates

5. In keeping with our commitment to support excellence in the national research base, HEFCE requires the research degree programmes that it supports through its grant to meet minimum standards set out in the revised Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) code of practice¹.
6. In September 2004 (Circular Letter 18/2004) we announced our plans to monitor how long it takes postgraduate research students to obtain their qualification, as one measure by which the quality of the research degree programme could be assessed.
7. We had planned to use the outcome as part of the evidence base for the QAA special review of research degree programme (RDP) provision in 2005-06, and to publish these rates. However, our work in calculating the rates revealed serious concerns in some institutions about the accuracy of the data. We decided not to pass any data to the QAA for the 2005-06 review and not to publish the rates without allowing institutions to examine their own data and correct historical errors.
8. We have now undertaken two verification exercises and allowed HEIs to correct historical data errors, and HEIs have signed off their qualification rates as being complete and accurate and fit for publication. (Further details about the verification exercise are given in paragraphs 25 to 29.) Published rates will be available to QAA audit teams as part of the evidence base for institutional audits.

Interpreting the data

9. The data in Tables P1 and P2 (see Excel documents) should be read in the context of the following notes.
10. We calculate qualification rates in terms of the proportion of students enrolling onto a research degree programme in a particular year and qualifying within a given period – in this case, for students enrolling full-time in 1999-2000 and qualifying by the end of 2005-06. It should be stressed that there are no targets for qualification rates and no simple direct link between the rates and funding.
11. The qualification rates must be interpreted in the light of factors which are known to impact upon a student's chances of completing their degree within the given time frame. These factors were described in 'PhD Research Degrees: Entry and Qualification' (HEFCE 2005/02) and the update of this report, HEFCE 2007/28. The following factors were found to be associated with varying rates of qualification:
 - a. Mode of study (full-time or part-time).
 - b. Domicile.
 - c. Source of student funding.
 - d. Subject.

¹ www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/

- e. Age.
- f. Qualification on entry.

12. We are currently only publishing data relating to students enrolling initially on a full-time basis, excluding those that have switched mode (from full-time to part-time or vice versa) and those that enrolled part-time, to allow a longer time frame to calculate those rates. We envisage publishing all rates by mode of study from 2009 onwards.

13. Overseas students are not funded by HEFCE and therefore we do not have a direct interest in their rates. However, discussions with the sector during the 2005 verification exercise consultation on the QAA code of practice indicated that they would like these rates to be included, so they are presented in a separate table.

Benchmarks

14. We have introduced benchmarks in order to avoid comparisons between institutions that are so different in terms of the profile of students that they should not be compared directly. These have been calculated for each HEI to show what the qualification rate would be if it reflected the sector average after taking into account the impact of variations in subject mix and (for home students only) the proportion of students receiving funding support from a Research Council – the two most significant remaining causes of variation in the qualification rates. The benchmarks are shown in Tables P1 and P2.

15. The actual figures for numbers of students at each HEI studying science-based subjects and (for home students) receiving Research Council support are shown as context statistics to help the reader to interpret the qualification rate and benchmark. (For this purpose, science-based courses are defined as medicine, veterinary science, subjects allied to medicine, biological sciences, physical sciences, engineering, mathematics, and agriculture.) Following feedback from the data verification exercise we have also included context statistics showing the number of students who are still actively pursuing their research degree programmes and the number who transfer to another institution.

16. **The benchmarks are not targets.** They are average values which will change from one year to the next if the profile of students within an institution changes. They are provided to give information about the sort of values that might be expected for an institution's indicator taking that profile into account. Any differences between the benchmark and the HEI's qualification rate may either reflect an outcome different to that expected of their profile or some other factor which is not included in the benchmark.

17. We have used two symbols to show significance in the degree of variation of the qualification rate from the benchmark. If an institution is marked in this way, this should be taken as an invitation to the HEI to investigate possible causes for the differences that have been identified, whether they arise from an indicator that is better than the benchmark (marked +), or worse than the benchmark (marked -). Where the difference is not marked, the indicator is either within the range that would be expected, given random fluctuations, or is less than three percentage points away from the benchmark.

18. HEIs responding to our data verification exercises felt that the rates should exclude students who have taken periods of suspension or extension. Our view is that these students should not be excluded. This is because we allow a seven-year period between the student starting the programme and when we calculate the qualification rate. This should account for the majority of full-time students who suspend or extend their studies but go on to qualify. We also believe that in monitoring the rates, and notwithstanding the effects of factors captured by the other context statistics, there should not be a significantly higher proportion of students suspending or extending their studies at one institution compared with another. Thus we do not adjust the rates for suspension or extension.

Methodology

19. Full details on the method used to calculate qualification rates can be read in Annex H of the HEFCE publication '2005-06 statistics derived from HESA data' (HEFCE 2006/23). We summarise the key points below.

Qualification rate

20. Qualification rates are derived from the number of qualifiers divided by the total population. Qualification rates are calculated over seven years. This time frame is derived from 'PhD Research Degrees: Entry and Qualification' (HEFCE 2005/02), which showed that after seven years the numbers of additional qualifiers and of students ceasing to be active have started to level off. The update of this report (HEFCE 2007/28) shows that rates continue to rise beyond a seven year period but not significantly so. It is also the longest time frame over which we can have confidence in the data.

Population

21. Population is defined by all full time students starting in the baseline year and returning for the second year. This follows the practice of the Research Councils in calculating the submission rates of the students they support. There is no adjustment for institutional transfers, individual reasons for non-qualification (apart from death) or time taken out or periods of suspension.

22. We also undertake a 'changing cohort' approach to determine the size of the population. Where students registered as MPhil or MRes students subsequently show evidence of studying for a doctoral qualification they are retrospectively added to the population in the year in which they commenced the MPhil.

23. We consider this to be a fair approach, although we are aware that it may show slightly favourable rates for those institutions whose policy it is to initially register all research degree students on an MPhil or MRes. For example, University X registers all potential PhD students as MPhil students until they satisfactorily complete two years of their programme. University Y records all students who aspire to complete a research degree programme as PhD students regardless of whether they will gain an MPhil part way through the course. If we assume that a student withdraws from each university after one-and-a-half-years, only the student at University Y will be counted as not qualifying, since no formal expectation was recorded that the student at University X would proceed beyond the MPhil.

Omission of small numbers

24. In keeping with our established approach in relation to performance indicators and the National Student Survey statistics, we have undertaken to omit very small numbers to protect the identity of the individuals and because the derived statistics can be misleading. The rounding and omission strategy is as follows:

- a. Where the population is less than 23 students we do not show qualification rates, benchmarks, number of qualifiers or context statistics; we only show the population (rounded to the nearest five).
- b. Where the population is 23 or more but less than 53 we show the rates, number of qualifiers and context statistics, but the rates are rounded to the nearest 5 per cent. If the number of qualifiers or a context statistic is less than 23 these are not shown, otherwise they are rounded to the nearest five.
- c. Where the population is greater than 53 we show the rates, number of qualifiers and context statistics, and the rates are rounded to the nearest 1 per cent. If the number of qualifiers or a context statistic is less than 23 these are not shown, or if these are less than 53 they are rounded to the nearest five.

Verification exercise

25. In our 2005 verification exercise we invited HEIs to comment on a proposed methodology and format for calculating and publishing research degree qualification rates. We also asked them to comment on whether their underlying HESA data were fit for monitoring qualification rates and for publication.

26. Almost all respondents acknowledged errors in their underlying HESA data which, to varying degrees, influenced the accuracy of the rates we calculated for them. Most errors were for the academic years 1995-96 to 1997-98, so we decided to restrict the rates now being published to students commencing their studies after 31 July 1999. This limits the dataset to the period after 1998-99, when between-years validation was introduced to the HESA record, which increased the consistency of data that span several academic years.

27. In 2006 we undertook a further data verification exercise to confirm with institutions the accuracy of the underlying data from 1999 onwards. Details of this exercise can be found in HEFCE Circular Letter 10/2006. Institutions have had the opportunity to correct any errors from 1999-2000 onwards, and signed off their qualification rates as being complete and accurate and fit for publication as part of the sign-off process for their 2005-06 HESA student return.

28. During this verification period, HESA and HEFCE accepted amendments to HESA data for 2004-05 only. Where institutions identified errors in HESA data prior to 2004-05 they had to provide us with enough information to enable us to correct the derived fields for individual students that informed the calculation of the research degree qualification rates.

29. Where changes to HESA data for 2004-05 or corrections to derived fields for earlier years were required, we asked institutions to submit an action plan to explain the cause of the error, the fields that required amendment, and how they would ensure that these errors were not repeated in the future. (Note that we have not corrected underlying HESA data prior to 2004-05 but we have amended the fields derived from HESA data that are used to calculate the rates.) In the first instance these action plans were analysed by our staff to ensure that the changes were credible; in the longer term we will audit the plans.