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Issues paper

This report is for information

This is the second in a series of publications showing qualification rates of students on research degree programmes in individual higher education institutions in England. For the first time we include data on part-time and mode-switch students. No action is required in response.

Research degree qualification rates

Full-time students starting in 2000-01, 2001-02 or 2002-03

Part-time and mode-switch students starting in 1999-2000

Research degree qualification rates

Full-time students starting in 2000-01, 2001-02 or 2002-03;

Part-time and mode-switch students starting in 1999-2000

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

Purpose

1. This document is the second in a series of publications showing qualification¹ rates of students on research degree programmes at individual higher education institutions (HEIs) in England. For the first time we include data on part-time and mode-switch² students. For this purpose research degree programmes are considered to be the study towards doctorate degrees obtained primarily through advanced supervised research.

Key points

2. We expect that this information will be of interest to HEIs and others interested in the quality of research degree programmes and qualification rates of research degree students.

3. We first published qualification rates of students on research degree programmes in 2007 for full-time students who had enrolled on research degrees in 1999-2000 ('Research degree qualification rates', HEFCE 2007/29). The rates presented in this document are for:

- full-time students who started research degree programmes in 2000-01, 2001-02 or 2002-03 (shown in tables marked P1 for home and EC students and P2 for overseas students)

¹ A student is defined as qualifying when they have been awarded a higher degree by research and the 'qualification obtained' has been returned through the individualised HESA student record. This will typically be up to a year after the student submitted their thesis for assessment.

² Mode-switch students are those that change mode of study from full-time to part-time or vice-versa.

- part-time and mode-switch students who started research degree programmes in 1999-2000 (shown in table P3 for home and EC students and P4 for overseas students).

4. We have calculated the rates in this report from data submitted by HEIs to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). For each HEI in England, we have separately calculated:

- a. Qualification rates of full-time students who started their research degree in 2000-01, 2001-02 and 2002-03 – that is, the proportion of starters in each of these years who had qualified within seven years.
- b. The proportion of part-time and mode-switch students who started their research degree in 1999-2000 and had qualified within 10 years.

Each HEI's rate is presented alongside a benchmark (which is a sector-adjusted average) and, where appropriate, an indicator which highlights significant variation from the benchmark. Also, data have been aggregated across three years where possible to show the qualification rates of institutions with fewer than 23 students in each cohort which would otherwise be omitted from publication.

Action required

5. This document is for information only.

Background

6. In keeping with our commitment to support excellence in the national research base, we require the research degree programmes we support through our grant to meet minimum standards set out in the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) code of practice³.

7. In September 2004 (HEFCE Circular letter 18/2004) we announced plans to monitor how long it takes postgraduate research students to obtain their qualification, as one measure by which the quality of research degree programmes could be assessed. See paragraphs 19-20 for more detail on how these rates are used for quality assurance purposes.

8. We published research degree qualification rates for full-time students in English HEIs for the first time in 2007 in 'Research degree qualification rates' (HEFCE 2007/29). We are now publishing three sets of full-time rates and for the first time a set of part-time and mode-switch rates. We expect that this information will be of interest to HEIs and others interested in the quality of research degree programmes and qualification rates of research degree students.

Interpreting the data

9. The data are given in Tables 2000-01 P1, 2000-01 P2, 2001-02 P1, 2001-02 P2, 2002-03 P1, 2002-03 P2, 1999-2000 P3 and 1999-2000 P4 (see Excel files published on the HEFCE web-site alongside this document) and should be read in the context of the following notes.

10. Rates are presented in separate tables for home and EC domiciled students and for overseas domiciled students. We also present the rates separately for full-time students and for part-time and mode-switch students (the data for part-time and mode-switch students have been combined into a single dataset).

11. Each table shows, for each HEI, the total number of students who began a research degree programme in a particular academic year, and the number who qualified after a given period. For full-time rates this period is seven years and for part-time/mode-switch students it is 10 years.

12. There are no targets for qualification rates and no direct link between qualification rates and the funding we provide to institutions to support their supervision of postgraduate degree programmes.

13. The qualification rates must be interpreted in the light of factors which are known to impact on a student's chances of completing their doctoral degree within the given time frame. These factors were described in 'PhD research degrees: Entry and completion' (HEFCE 2005/02) and the update of that report, HEFCE 2007/28. The following factors were found to be associated with varying rates of qualification:

- mode of study (full-time or part-time)

³ 'Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education', see www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeofpractice/

- domicile
- subject
- source of student funding
- age
- qualification on entry
- ethnicity.

14. In HEFCE 2007/29 we published data on total numbers of students in each institution still actively pursuing their research degree, and numbers of students who transferred to another institution. This time we have not done so, because the numbers for almost all institutions are small and therefore would mostly be omitted (see paragraph 26). However, the sector totals are shown in Table 1⁴:

Table 1 Total number of students still actively pursuing their research degree programmes after a given period* and the number who transfer to another institution during their course

	Number of students still active	Number of students transferred
2000-01 Full-time home and EC starting cohort	85	100
2000-01 Full-time overseas starting cohort	50	50
2001-02 Full-time home and EC starting cohort	150	90
2001-02 Full-time overseas starting cohort	125	65
2002-03 Full-time home and EC starting cohort	120	115
2002-03 Full-time overseas starting cohort	110	70
1999-2000 Part-time and mode-switch home and EC starting cohort	175	170
1999-2000 Part-time and mode-switch overseas starting cohort	30	Omitted number (see paragraph 26)

* For full-time rates this period is seven years and for part-time/mode-switch students it is 10 years.

Benchmarks

15. In light of evidence about the factors affecting a student's chances of completing their degree in a given time frame, we have provided benchmarks to support interpretation of the qualification rates. These avoid comparisons between institutions whose student profiles are so different from each other that they should not be compared directly. These benchmarks have been calculated for each HEI, and they 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 full-

⁴ All figures in this table are rounded to the nearest five.

time home and EC students only⁵, the proportion of students receiving funding support from a Research Council. The benchmarks are shown in Tables 2000-01 P1, 2000-01 P2, 2001-02 P1, 2001-02 P2, 2002-03 P1, 2002-03 P2, 1999-2000 P3 and 1999-2000 P4 alongside the qualification rate.

16. **The benchmarks are not targets.** They are sector-adjusted 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, taking the profile of its research degree students into account. Any differences between the benchmark and the HEI's qualification rate could either reflect an outcome different to that expected of their profile, or some other factor which is not included in the benchmark.

17. The tables also show actual numbers of students at each HEI studying science-based subjects and, for full-time home and EC students, receiving Research Council support. These data are provided as contextual information to help readers 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.

18. We have used two symbols to show significance in the degree of variation of the qualification rate from the benchmark. Where the difference is marked, the difference between the indicator and benchmark is three or more standard deviations away from zero: this reflects our judgement that variations of this extent are sufficiently different to be noteworthy. If an institution is marked, 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 -).

Using research degree qualification rates for quality assurance

19. HEFCE is committed to using research degree qualification rates to support the quality assurance of research degree programmes. This is done in two ways. The information published by HEFCE is made available to the QAA, which may make use of the published rates as part of an institutional audit, in particular in assessing the extent to which an institution has met the expectations of precept four of section one of the Code of Practice, which states 'Institutions will monitor the success of their postgraduate research programmes against appropriate internal and/or external indicators and targets'.

20. Also, we will consider the rates; where we consider that these may indicate possible cause for particular concerns we may raise this with the institution, requesting that they explain the reasons for the rates and what action the institution has taken or is taking to address any issues underlying the rates. Where we remain concerned, we may subsequently ask the QAA to investigate the issue on our behalf via its Cause for Concern process.

⁵ The numbers of overseas and part-time/mode-switch students receiving Research Council support are too small to make a significant difference to the calculation of benchmarks.

Methodology

21. Details of the method used to calculate qualification rates can be read in Annex I of '2007-08 statistics derived from HESA data: Guide to HEFCE web facility' (HEFCE 2008/30). We summarise the key points below.

Qualification rate

22. Qualification rates are derived from the number of qualifiers divided by the total population. Full-time qualification rates are calculated over seven years. This time frame is derived from 'PhD research degrees: Entry and completion' (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 that report (HEFCE 2007/28) shows that rates continue to rise beyond a seven-year period but not significantly so. Part-time and mode-switch qualification rates are calculated over 10 years. A high proportion of both full- and part-time students who will receive the award eventually will already have qualified within these periods, and these data give a good indication of the relative levels of qualification that we would expect to find over a longer period.

Population

23. Population is defined as all full-time students starting in the baseline year and returning for the second year. There is no adjustment for institutional transfers, individual reasons for non-qualification (apart from death) or time taken out or periods of suspension.

24. 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 or MRes.

Aggregation of cohort data

25. In the previous publication ('Research degree qualification rates', HEFCE 2007/29), we did not publish rates for some institutions because they had very small numbers of students. To increase coverage of qualification rates to as many English institutions as possible, we have now combined data from small⁶ annual cohorts over three years and presented the rate on the basis of these aggregate data. The tables indicate which data and rates are based on a single cohort and which are aggregated.

Omission of small numbers

26. We have omitted from the published data small numbers to protect the identity of individuals and because the derived statistics can be misleading. The approach to rounding and omission we use here is also used in other contexts (such as Unistats), and 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).

⁶ A small cohort is one where the population is less than 23 for the cohort year being published.

- b. Where the population is 23 or more but less than 53 we show the qualification 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

27. Between March and May 2010, we asked institutions to verify their rates. This exercise provided institutions with an opportunity to correct their underlying HESA data (or the data derived from these underlying data) where errors in these data caused their rates to be incorrect.