Code of Practice for the Supervision of Research Degrees

May 2014

Contents

1 Introduction

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this document is to provide a code of good practice for supervision of research degrees within Edinburgh Napier University. As such, it will primarily be of interest to members of staff who are supervising, or are going to supervise, research students. However, it will also be of relevance to students.

1.2 Other documents

The Code of Practice supplements the University's Academic Regulations, of which Section D is the most relevant to research student supervision. The Code of Practice should be read in conjunction with the University's Research Degrees Framework. All documents are available on the Research Degrees web pages and the student portal.

The Code of Practice is informed by the expectation and indicators of good practice found in Chapter 11: Research Degrees of the Quality Assurance Agency's UK Quality Code for Higher Education (available at www.qaa.ac.uk). The expectation and indicators are listed in Appendix 1 of this Code of Practice.

1.3 University structures

There are minor differences in the way research degree supervision is practised across the University. The University's Research Degrees Assessment Board (RDAB) is the body concerned with the assurance of the quality of supervision and scrutiny of examination arrangements and outcomes. RDAB is a sub-committee of the University's Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee. Each Faculty has a research degrees management group and a research degrees coordinator. The management group is responsible for the monitoring of research student progress. In the Faculty of Engineering, Computing and Creative Industries, due to student numbers, the faculty management group devolves monitoring to school research degrees management groups. In all cases, final decisions on student progress reside formally with RDAB.

2 Admissions and selection procedures

A number of the QAA code precepts are relevant here, and are reflected in this Code, as well as in the University regulations for research degrees and the Research Degrees Framework.

2.1 The research environment

Research environments across the University vary, so the actual environment and facilities experienced by a research student will also vary. At a minimum level, full-time students should have a designated desk and computer, with access to phone and printing facilities. Part-time students will have access at least to 'hot desk' arrangements. In addition to specialist education and development in students' specific subject area, the University provides a wide range of development activities to support their studies. These include training in specific research methods and research ethics, academic writing and presentation skills, and advanced study skills. Students are encouraged to negotiate a programme of activities with their

supervisors, to ensure that their learning remains relevant and appropriate as they progress through their degree. Opportunities for learning and development are available throughout their studies. Students have the opportunity to present their work at seminars and conferences both within Edinburgh Napier and beyond, and where possible to take advantage of opportunities for teaching. The University is committed to public engagement and offers students opportunities to their communicate research to audiences beyond academia, including industry, policy-makers and the general public.

2.2 Admissions

Entry requirements are laid down in Section 2 of the University's Research Degrees Framework.

Applicants whose first language is not English must provide evidence of an appropriate English language qualification. As with many other universities, these are based on an IELTS standard, with permissible alternatives. Reference should always be made to the version of the Research Degrees Framework in force at the time of a potential admission.

2.3 Applications

The University will consider speculative applications as well as applications for specific advertised studentships.

Potential applicants should be directed to the relevant section of the University website: http://www.napier.ac.uk/research/research-degrees/Pages/Apply.aspx to find advice, information and the forms that must be completed.

2.4 Selection

In essence, there are two aspects to the admissions process: assessing the suitability of the candidate and ensuring the fairness of the process. Section 2 of the Research Degrees Framework requires that interviews be conducted by at least two academic members of staff. One interviewer must have relevant subject expertise; one must be independent of the potential supervisory team. It is important that admissions procedures follow all the statutory requirements that the University is required to follow under equal opportunities and other legislation. Reasons for appointing, or not appointing, a particular candidate should be recorded.

2.5 Offers of admission

Formal offers of admission are made by Student and Academic Services on the basis of authorisation from the relevant school (using an RD2 form). This authorisation confirms that a supervisory team has been appointed, that all necessary facilities are available and, where appropriate, arrangement for the payment of fees and stipend have been made.

2.6 Registration

Formal registration occurs when the individual matriculates as a student of the University and commences their study. As the periods of study are strictly defined,

the start date is important and is the date formally approved on the RD2 form. All students register initially on a generic research degree programme. A formal review (RD5) to determine the target degree (MRes/MPhil/PhD) is held within the first 12 months of registration (18 months for part-time students).

2.7 Induction

Information to enable students to begin their studies is typically provided by a combination of the University's induction process, the supervisory team and the school or faculty research degrees coordinators. The supervisory team is expected to meet with the student soon after arrival, and will introduce the student to the specific research environment and academic context. Faculty research degrees coordinators will organise an induction programme, including social activities that allow new students to meet with other research degree students. It is particularly important to encourage part-time students to attend such events.

Faculties and schools tend to have a small number of preferred start times during the year, as this helps with planning of induction and development events. The main intake is generally the autumn and the key induction events are organised principally for students starting early in October. However, it is recognised that students will start at other times in the year and therefore might not experience formal induction events until some time after they have started.

3 Supervision

3.1 The supervisory team

The supervisory team will normally comprise two and not more than three supervisors. The team is led by a Director of Studies, who is responsible for ensuring that an appropriate programme of research and related studies is put in place and delivered effectively. The Director of Studies is also responsible for ensuring that student progress is monitored effectively, according to the Research Degrees Framework. The Director of Studies must be an Edinburgh Napier University staff member. Normally the supervisory team will also comprise a second supervisor and an independent panel member. The Director of Studies and the second supervisor can be allocated on the basis of a number of key factors, such as subject expertise, expertise in methodology and methods, or techniques of data analysis. Supervisors will also have roles as personal mentor or tutors to support students in their development as researchers. The role of the independent panel member is to provide, as the title suggests, independent oversight of the supervisory process, including the chairing of formal progress reviews and a student's *viva voce* examination. The Research Degrees Framework provides detailed requirements for the experience required by the supervisory team.

3.2 The supervisory process

The relationship between the student and the supervisory team is crucial to the success of the research degree process. Students should feel confident to accept, and learn from, constructive criticism provided by the supervisory team. They should also feel able to bring personal, social or health problems to their Director of Studies, especially if these are affecting the progress of the studies. The second supervisor

can play a significant role here by providing an alternative channel for communication to the student.

The Director of Studies, in conjunction with the other member(s) of the supervision team, is responsible for:

- maintaining regular contact with the student;
- advising the student of the roles of the supervisory team and of the roles and responsibilities of the research student;
- discussing with the student any initial training or development needs, and reviewing these as part of the student's personal development throughout the course of their studies;
- agreeing, and regularly reviewing, the pattern of meetings that the student will have with the Director of Studies and any other members of the supervisory team;
- advising (with other members of the supervisory team) the overall direction of the research work;
- providing constructive criticism of work produced by the student;
- ensuring the student is made aware of any inadequacy in the standard of any work, or of any inadequacies in the rate of progress towards the target degree;
- administering the research programme, the review process, and the associated paperwork and reporting.

The student is responsible for:

- maintaining regular contact with supervisors;
- preparing adequately for meetings with supervisors;
- setting and keeping to timetables and deadlines, including planning and submitting work as and when required and generally maintaining satisfactory progress with the programme of research;
- making supervisors aware of any specific needs or circumstances likely to affect their work;
- attending any development opportunities (research-related and other) that have been identified when agreeing their development needs with their supervisors;
- being familiar with the University's regulations and policies that affect them, including those relating to their award, health and safety, intellectual property, electronic repositories, and ethical research;
- their own personal and professional development, including, where possible, recognising when they need help and seeking it in a timely manner;
- maintaining their own personal development record/portfolio.

In any instance where the relationship between the student and the supervisory team breaks down, the student or the Director of Studies should be able to seek advice from the independent panel member, or the faculty or school research degrees coordinator.

3.3 Supervisors: knowledge, skills and workload

The University requires the supervisory team to have a minimum level of experience of supervision before being permitted to supervise research degree students. At least one supervisor must have had experience of supervising candidates to the successful completion of a UK PhD. A supervisory team must have a combined

experience of supervising not fewer than two candidates to successful completion. The supervisory team also needs to demonstrate that it has the necessary subject expertise to supervise specific students.

All staff are expected to take part in appropriate supervisory development activities, in order to ensure that their work continues to be aligned with sectoral best practice. The University offers a range of development opportunities for staff involved in or intending to undertake supervision. Existing supervisors are required to participate in refresher briefings, normally every two years. Provision includes a SEDA-recognised, three-day course for supervising research degrees.

The workload of supervisors is the responsibility of the supervisors' line managers, who should ensure that supervisors have the necessary capacity to fulfil their roles as research degree supervisors (indicator 12 of the QAA Code of Practice). There is a standard workload allowance under the University's workload framework for supervising a research degree student. Depending on the school, there may be a default method of sharing this allocation between the members of the team, although this should be flexible. Different patterns of supervision may be appropriate depending on, for example, the role played by the second supervisor.

4   Reviewing Student Progress

Supervisors should ensure that research student progress is monitored regularly. The university expects supervisory meetings to be held at least once a month, in order to ensure that research is being conducted appropriately. The frequency of meetings should be negotiated between student and supervisory team. It is recognised that the frequency of meetings might change at different stages in the research. For instance, it is likely that more meetings will take place in the early stages of research, where students are formulating and clarifying their research focus, with fewer meetings during fieldwork or off-site experimental work.

In addition to regular research meetings, the University requires students and their supervisory teams to complete twice-yearly formal progress reviews. The purpose of these reviews is to recognise good progress, consider development needs and to discuss any issues affecting progress which student and supervisors wish to address in terms of, for example, the research project, supervision support and/or training and development. At each review students must submit a written report detailing their research work. The format of the report will depend on the particular review, which are: thesis topic and programme of study; determination of target degree (report of the transfer review); and reports on research student progress (progress review).

The Research Degrees Assessment Board uses the records of these reviews (RD forms) to guide its decisions on the progress of individual students, for instance when considering applications for extension. It is therefore important that the forms accurately record progress as assessed by the panel (QAA indicator 13).

4.1 Determination of thesis topic and programme of study

This takes place within six months of registration (nine for a part-time student). For a student expecting to register for an MRes, this should take place at the same time as the determination of target degree review. The student submits a research proposal of not more than five pages which draws on reading and work completed to date and will contain: a statement of the context and background for the research (including a brief literature review); a statement of the research questions, hypotheses or focus of the study; an outline of the methods of enquiry to be used, the data to be gathered, and how it is to be analysed; a report of any research already undertaken; a bibliography of literature already reviewed and the conclusions reached; a clear plan of work for the next six months; and an outline plan of the work required to complete the research programme. The supervisory team meets to discuss the proposal with the student, which will include assessment of the student's potential to complete the programme of study, training and development requirements and ethical implications of the research. The result of this assessment is recorded on form RD4.

4.2 The determination of target degree review

The determination of target degree review, also known as the transfer review, is an important stage in a research degree. As with many other UK universities, Edinburgh Napier University requires students to demonstrate their ability to work at an appropriate level, and at an appropriate rate. In order to do this, the determination of target degree review constitutes a formal element of the student's research journey, with specific requirements in terms of what the student must produce. In particular, the student is expected to be able to demonstrate that they:

- understand their field of research;
- are up to date with, and can demonstrate critical evaluation of, the literature;
- can assess the relevance of the literature to the proposed line of study;
- can demonstrate how the literature has guided their research objectives;
- know where they are going in the next phase of their project.

This is typically achieved by the student producing a report that includes a substantial literature review, which is presented to, and discussed by, the student's supervisory team. The team will assess:

- the standard of presentation and structure;
- the quality and scope of the literature review;
- research objectives;
- proposed methodology and awareness of alternative approaches;
- expected contribution to knowledge;
- engagement with ethical issues;
- proposed plan of work;
- references.

The RD5 form is used to record the outcome of the review. Section 4 of the Research Degrees Framework should be consulted for details of the procedure and the possible outcomes.

As well as assessing the student's ability to work at an appropriate level, this is also a time at which the student's ability to work at an appropriate rate is addressed. To emphasise this, there are limits on the length of time within which the determination of target degree review can take place: 12 months for full-time students, and 18 months for part-time students.   Students intending to graduate with an MRes should have the determination of target degree review within six months of matriculation and should combine this review with the determination of thesis topic review.

The normal outcome of the review is a decision as to the named award for which the student will register (PhD, MPhil, MRes or DBA). However, if the review reveals unsatisfactory progress, the student will be required to revise and resubmit the transfer report, and undertake a second review. Particularly poor progress may even result in the termination of registration. Section 4 of the Research Degrees Framework outlines the process for a refer decision, which includes timescales for re-submission (a maximum of three months for full-time students and five months for part-time students).

4.3   Reports on research student progress (progress reviews)

These reviews normally take place every six months, whether students are full-time or part-time. Formal progress reviews require students to demonstrate to the supervisory team that they are making appropriate progress as specified in the Research Degrees Framework. Students are expected to produce a written report detailing their progress since the last review. Normally the report will include an outline plan for the next six months. The length of the report will depend to some extent on the discipline, but should be about four pages. The report should contain:

- a brief summary of the research, including aims and objectives, and research questions;
- an overview of the major activities and progress made in the past 6 months since the previous review;
- a description of any academic or non-academic problems that have impeded the research or are likely to do so;
- a plan for the next six months;
- a description of any training or development needs identified since the last progress review and any training or development undertaken in that period;
- a Gantt chart, or similar, to indicate work undertaken and future milestones.

The panel is required to report on progress using the RD6 form. This report should address:

- assessment of progress, particularly against agreed milestones and objectives;
- whether the student has maintained regular contact;
- any known non-academic factors which have impeded (or will impede) the student's progress;
- any other matters that should be brought to the attention of the research degrees coordinators.

The panel should also check the student's personal and professional development record. This can take a number of forms, but should contain evidence of regular

skills auditing, identification of development needs, and a record of development activities.

The outcome of the review is a decision on the progression of the student.

4.4 Researcher Development

Research students working at the highest academic levels should be encouraged to take ownership of their own development (QAA indicator 14). Edinburgh Napier University has adopted the Researcher Development Framework (RDF), which has been developed by Vitae, a UK-wide organisation championing the personal, professional and career development of doctoral researchers and research staff. The RDF articulates the knowledge, behaviours and attributes of successful researchers and encourages them to aspire to excellence through continued professional development. The RDF intends that researchers within higher education should evaluate and plan their own personal, professional and career development. As such it applies to all research students, who considered as a constituent group of the wider group of early career researchers. It is also intended for managers/supervisors of researchers in their role supporting the development of researchers, and hence covers supervisory teams. More details can be found at: http://www.vitae.ac.uk/

Individual activities will depend on the development needs that have been identified by students in consultation with their supervisory teams. Schools, faculties and the University provide a number of development opportunities that may be of relevance at different stages during a student's career. Discipline-specific needs (such as specialised technical or mathematical training) may not be available within the University. However, supervisory teams, with their specialised domain knowledge, can assist with the identification of appropriate activities from other sources. Each faculty has a research degrees coordinator who helps support researcher development in their faculty, and at a University level there is a Researcher Developer based in Academic Professional Development within Human Resources and Development. All University-wide development events are advertised on the staff intranet and through the Student Portal. They are also listed here: http://staff.napier.ac.uk/SERVICES/HR/DEVELOPMENT/ACPROFDEV/RD/Pages/RDhome.aspx

5 Absences

5.1 Leave

Full-time students may take up to 40 days holiday each year, including public (fixed) holidays. There are normally 14 fixed holidays each year. All periods of leave should be discussed and agreed with the Director of Studies. All periods of leave taken will be in addition to days on which the university is closed for public holidays.

Part-time have no 'entitlement' to specific periods of leave from study as they are already fitting study time around other commitments. Holidays should form part of the schedule and the director of studies should be kept informed of any lengthy break.

5.2 Suspension for sickness or other reasons

Where a student is ill for a significant period of time, or has personal circumstances that prevent them from studying, an application for a period of suspended study should be submitted. This is done using form RD7, which requires a brief statement of the reason for the suspension, which must be agreed by the supervisory team. The application should be formally approved by the school or faculty research degrees coordinator.

Caution must be exercised when considering applications for suspended study from overseas students, to ensure that the terms of any visa are not contravened. If the student is on a Tier 4 visa, the University's Points Based Immigration Manager should be approached for advice before proceeding. If the student is not on a Tier 4 visa, standard procedures for considering and approving suspended study can be followed.

The application for suspension is sometimes accompanied by sensitive material (such as medical notes). This should be securely stored locally by the Director of Studies. It is not necessary to append such material to the RD7 form or to provide detail on the form about mitigating circumstances such as medical problems.

5.3 Other absence

International students who wish to return to their home country to write up their thesis must receive written permission to do so from their school. If the student is on a Tier 4 visa, the University's Points Based Immigration Manager should be approached for advice before proceeding.

5.4 Extension

In certain exceptional circumstances, a student may be permitted to extend their maximum registration period. Applications should be submitted to the University RDAB, using form RD10, and must have the support of the school or faculty research degrees coordinator. Applications should be submitted no later than three months before the end of the maximum registration period.

6 Assessment

Section 7 of the Research Degrees Framework covers the requirements for the examination in detail. Section 6 covers the specification of the thesis. A viva voce examination is compulsory for awards for the awards of MPhil, PhD and DBA. It is a discretionary for the award of MRes, where the examiners may request a viva voce examination as a means of helping to determine difficult or borderline cases.

6.1 Preparation for the examination

When the student and supervisory team agree that the thesis is nearing completion, and at least three months before the expected examination date, the Director of Studies should make an application for approval of the proposed examination team,

using form RD12, with an accompanying brief CV for each examiner. The team must comprise at least two examiners (at least one of whom must be external to the university) and will include an independent panel chair, who may be the panel chair from the student's supervisory team. Detailed requirements for the constitution and experience of the examination team are provided in the Research Degrees Framework. The application must be submitted at faculty level for initial scrutiny and support, but approval of the examination team may only be granted by the University's Research Degrees Assessment Board.

6.2   The viva voce examination

It is the responsibility of the Director of Studies to arrange the date and location of the viva voce examination. All examiners are required to provide a written pre-viva report on the thesis in advance of the viva voce examination. The Director of Studies (or second supervisor) may attend the viva as an observer, with the agreement of the candidate, but must withdraw prior to the deliberations of the examiners on the outcome of the examination.

There are seven possible outcomes to the examination and these are listed in regulation D6.6 and in Section 7 of the Research Degrees Framework. These are: three levels of pass (unconditionally, subject to minor amendments, subject to major amendments); two levels of resubmission (with or without a second viva); and two levels of fail (one of which invites the candidate to resubmit for a lesser award). Where amendments are required, the examiners will provide written guidance on what is expected and specify which of them must approve the amended version of the thesis.

Section D6 of the regulations and Section 7 of the Research Degrees Framework specify the timescales for the completion of amendments and resubmissions. These vary from two months to two years depending on the level of pass or resubmission. There is no difference in the timescales for full- and part-time students. Students required to resubmit may be liable to pay an additional writing-up fee.

Consideration of the amended thesis or resubmission will result in one of three recommendations: pass, unconditionally; pass, subject to further minor amendments; fail. Where further minor amendments are required the examiners will provide written guidance on what is expected and specify which of them must approve the amended version of the thesis. There is no further opportunity for amendments.

7   Feedback from research students

Research students should be able to provide feedback through:

- their supervisory team, including their independent panel chair.
- representative membership of research degree management groups and research and knowledge exchange committees at school or faculty level;
- Edinburgh Napier Students Association;
- the national Postgraduate Research Experience Survey.

8   Appeals, Complaints and Conduct

As a general principle, the University anticipates that appeals and complaints will normally be dealt with informally and locally in the first instance. Concerns should be raised with the supervisory team or the school or faculty research degrees coordinator. Where this does not lead to a satisfactory resolution, the student may wish to make a formal appeal or complaint.

Research students are entitled to make academic appeals in accordance with the University's Academic Appeals Regulations.

The grounds on which a complaint can be made, and how it will be handled, are set out in the Student Complaints Handling Procedures. This document, and the form that is used for recording such a complaint, is available on the student portal.

Advice may be sought from the University's Appeals, Complaints and Conduct Officer and from Edinburgh Napier Students Association.

Academic and non-academic misconduct by research students will be dealt with in accordance with the University's Student Conduct Regulations.

9 Appendix: QAA Expectation and Indicators for Research Degrees (June 2012)

Expectation

This Chapter of the Quality Code sets out the following Expectation about research degrees which higher education providers are required to meet:

> 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. This environment offers students quality of opportunities and the support they need to achieve successful academic, personal and professional outcomes from their research degrees.

Indicator 1

Higher education providers that are research degree awarding bodies have regulations for research degrees that are clear and readily available to research students and staff, including examiners. Where appropriate, regulations are supplemented by similarly accessible, subject-specific guidance at the level of the faculty, school, department, research centre or research institute.

Indicator 2

Higher education providers develop, implement and keep under review codes of practice for research degrees, which are widely applicable and help enable the higher education provider meet the Expectation of this Chapter. The codes are readily available to all students and staff involved in research degrees, and written in clear language understood by all users.

Indicator 3

Higher education providers monitor their research degree provision against internal and external indicators and targets that reflect the context in which research degrees are being offered.

Indicator 4

Higher education providers accept research students only into an environment that provides support for doing and learning about research, and where excellent research, recognised by the relevant subject community, is occurring.

Indicator 5

Higher education providers' admissions procedures for research degrees are clear, consistently applied and demonstrate equality of opportunity.

Indicator 6

Only appropriately qualified and prepared applicants are admitted to research degree programmes. Admissions decisions involve at least two members of the higher education provider's staff who have received training and guidance for the selection and admission of research degree students. The decision-making process

enables the higher education provider to assure itself that balanced and independent admissions decisions have been made in accordance with its admissions policy.

Indicator 7

Higher education providers define and communicate clearly the responsibilities and entitlements of students undertaking research degree programmes.

Indicator 8

Research students are provided with sufficient information to enable them to begin their studies with an understanding of the environment in which they will be working.

Indicator 9

Higher education providers appoint supervisors with the appropriate skills and subject knowledge to support and encourage research students, and to monitor their progress effectively.

Indicator 10

Each research student has a supervisory team containing a main supervisor who is the clearly identified point of contact.

Indicator 11

Higher education providers ensure that the responsibilities of research student supervisors are readily available and clearly communicated to supervisors and students.

Indicator 12

Higher education providers ensure that individual supervisors have sufficient time to carry out their responsibilities effectively.

Indicator 13

Higher education providers put in place clearly defined mechanisms for monitoring and supporting research student progress, including formal and explicit reviews of progress at different stages. Research students, supervisors and other relevant staff are made aware of progress monitoring mechanisms, including the importance of keeping appropriate records of the outcomes of meetings and related activities.

Indicator 14

Research students have appropriate opportunities for developing research, personal and professional skills. Each research student's development needs are identified and agreed jointly by the student and appropriate staff at the start of the degree; these are regularly reviewed and updated as appropriate.

Indicator 15

Higher education providers put in place mechanisms to collect, review and respond as appropriate to evaluations from those concerned with research degrees,

including individual research students and groups of research students or their representatives. Evaluations are considered openly and constructively and the results are communicated appropriately.

Indicator 16

Higher education providers that are research degree awarding bodies use criteria for assessing research degrees that enable them to define their academic standards and the achievements of their graduates. The criteria used to assess research degrees are clear and readily available to research students, staff and examiners.

Indicator 17

Research degree final assessment procedures are clear and are operated rigorously, fairly and consistently. They include input from an external examiner and are carried out to a reasonable timescale. Assessment procedures are communicated clearly to research students, supervisors and examiners.

Indicator 18

Higher education providers put in place and promote independent and formal procedures for dealing with complaints and appeals that are fair, clear to all concerned, robust, and applied consistently. The acceptable grounds for complaints and appeals are clearly defined.