

Advice on Doctoral Standards for Research Students and Supervisors

COVID-19 Support and Guidance

www.qaa.ac.uk/covid-19

Introduction

This advice has been produced by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in response to concerns expressed by PhD students about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their ability to carry out research and complete their studies on time. For the sake of brevity, we use the term 'PhD' generically to mean all types of doctoral qualification.

By clarifying national expectations for doctoral academic standards, we aim to reassure students who have had to replan and reschedule their research to accommodate the obstacles they have encountered. We also want to address a related concern that PhDs awarded during or in the aftermath of the pandemic may be of a different standard to those awarded before it.

How to use this advice

This resource takes the form of questions and answers that can be used both as a basis for personal reflection and to inform discussions between doctoral students and their supervisors. While recognising that each PhD project is unique, and that each student will have approached the problems caused by the pandemic in their own way, we hope that understanding the national standards for doctoral qualifications will be of use to all PhD students when considering the adjustments they have made, or will need to make, to their projects.



PhD standards

The standard that PhDs must achieve is defined by **qualification descriptors** that are listed in the UK's [national qualifications frameworks](#). The latter contain both the UK descriptor for doctoral qualifications and its European equivalent (known as the 'Dublin descriptors'). The **descriptor** for doctoral qualifications establishes a basis for the consistency of PhD standards across higher education providers by identifying the **outcomes** of PhDs and the **wider abilities** of those who hold them.

Higher education providers use the descriptor for doctoral qualifications as a benchmark for securing their own academic standards. The standard of your PhD therefore reflects national expectations as well as the expectations of the higher education provider at which you are studying, and the descriptors for doctoral qualifications may act as useful reference points when discussing your research with your supervisor. For your convenience, both the national and Dublin descriptors can be found in the appendix.



How do I know that my PhD will meet national standards in terms of output?

All PhDs require the candidate's work to demonstrate an original contribution to knowledge in their subject, field or profession, through original research or the original application of existing knowledge or understanding. The pandemic has required many students to replan their research with their supervisors to make it realisable within projected or extended timeframes, and this has been difficult for many students to achieve.

However, altering the outputs of your work or changing the data you work with as a result of the pandemic does not diminish the standard of your doctoral education.





The descriptor for doctoral qualifications states that PhDs are awarded to students who have demonstrated ‘a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge’, but it does not quantify a specific volume of research, such as a word count for a thesis, or other outputs such as those of PhDs by practice or publication. The Dublin descriptors similarly reference a ‘substantial body of work’, with no further quantification.

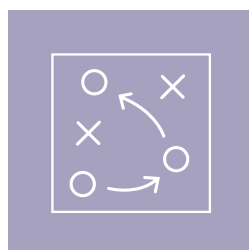
Both descriptors make it clear that there is no standard governing the volume of research or length of doctoral output other than that it should be ‘substantial’. **In this important sense, the standard of research is more important than its volume.** These submitted during the pandemic may have smaller datasets than originally planned but, provided they meet the national standards as set out in the descriptors, are as valid as PhDs awarded at any other time.

What are the ‘wider abilities’ that doctoral students typically possess, and how are they recognised within my PhD study?

In addition to stating doctoral ‘outcomes’, the national descriptor for doctoral qualifications and the Dublin descriptors identify the ‘wider abilities’ doctoral students possess, and these are as important as the output in assessing whether a student has met the national requirements for a PhD. This means in practice that successful PhD students will exhibit the same set of abilities, skills and competencies regardless of topic and subject.

In addition to abilities associated with the acquisition, interpretation and creation of knowledge, the descriptors identify a number of abilities associated with resilience and flexibility in dealing with challenges encountered on the doctoral journey. These abilities have acquired a particular resonance in the light of the pandemic.

The Dublin descriptors also stress the importance of flexibility in expecting students to ‘conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity.’ It is standard practice for PhD students to exhibit such flexibility by progressively adjusting, adapting and otherwise refining their project. **Students who have had to replan or rethink their projects to work around obstacles created by the pandemic are likely to have displayed these wider abilities.**





How do I know that the standard of my PhD will be the same as that of a PhD awarded at any other time?

In the UK, taught degrees use a classification system to identify standards of achievement within the award and the class students achieve is recorded on their degree certificate. For research degrees there are no standards of achievement over and above the threshold level required to pass. Doctorates are in effect pass/fail awards, and the degree certificate records only that students have achieved the award. **There is no classification system within the doctoral award**, and a doctoral qualification awarded during the pandemic is of the same standard as a doctoral qualification awarded at any other time.



Will any extensions or revisions to my project and thesis affect the award?

We know from data that requests for extensions to study have increased during the pandemic. **Extensions to study and post-viva revisions to the thesis or project are not recorded on the degree certificate, and are commonplace for PhD study in general.** The UK Council for Graduate Education (the national representative body for postgraduate education and research) has advised higher education providers to put in place [safeguards](#) to ensure that the standards of doctoral awards are maintained when considering any changes to student projects.



Further information

We hope these prompts form a helpful starting point for thinking about your projects, and support further discussion with peers and supervisors. You may also find these links useful:

- [Guidance for applicants, students and award-holders impacted by the pandemic](#), UKRI
- [COVID-19: Considerations for Doctoral Degrees](#), UK Council for Graduate Education
- [Guidance for providers about quality and standards during coronavirus \(COVID-19\) pandemic](#), Office for Students
- [Supporting the assessment of postgraduate students](#), QAA

Appendix: National and Dublin descriptors

Descriptor for a higher education qualification at level 8 on the FHEQ and SCQF level 12 on the FQHEIS: doctoral degree

Doctoral degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- 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
- 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
- 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 the light of unforeseen problems
- a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry.

Typically, holders of the qualification will be able to:

- 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
- 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.

And holders will have:

- 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

Dublin descriptors

Qualifications that signify completion of the third cycle are awarded to students who:

- have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field
- have demonstrated the ability to conceive, design, implement and adapt a substantial process of research with scholarly integrity
- have made a contribution through original
- research that extends the frontier of knowledge by developing a substantial body of work, some of which merits national or international refereed publication
- are capable of critical analysis, evaluation and synthesis of new and complex ideas
- can communicate with their peers, the larger scholarly community and with society in general about their areas of expertise
- can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge-based society.

QAA has produced a series of guidance, advice and support to help providers and students in the pandemic. We produce this with and for our members.

