Periodic Review of Postgraduate Research Degree Provision Policy

1. Context

1.1 Periodic review is conducted at Faculty level and forms part of the Quality Monitoring and Enhancement (QME) Framework at the University of Southampton. Periodic review evaluates the operation and performance of a Faculty's entire postgraduate research (PGR) degree provision.

1.2 Approval of all new PGR degree programmes, and the review of existing integrated PhD programmes, professional doctorates and those programmes that place additional progression requirements on students, will be managed through the [Programme Approval and Review: Postgraduate Research Degree Programmes](#) process.

2. Aim and scope

2.1 The aim of periodic review is to:

- ensure a Faculty's compliance with the University's [General Academic Regulations for Research Students](#) (and specifically, the [Regulations for Research Degrees](#) and the [Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision](#)); and
- to identify and promote the sharing of good practice; and
- to consider changes to research degree provision which will enhance the student experience.

2.2 The scope of periodic review includes:

- the student lifecycle from recruitment and admission through to progression review, examination and award;
- the student experience;
- the research environment and culture, and the resources available to support students and supervisors;
- the training and development available for students and supervisors.

3. Timing

3.1 Periodic review will be conducted every five years in accordance with a schedule determined by the Postgraduate Research Quality Monitoring and Enhancement (PGR QME) Subcommittee. However, a Faculty's research degree provision may be subject to more frequent review if significant concerns have been identified and/or where there has been notable change to the structure and delivery of its research degree provision

3.2 The Faculty Director of the Graduate School is responsible for planning and organising the review and should seek administrative support from the Quality, Standards and Accreditation Team (QSAT), the Doctoral College (Faculty) Team and the Head of Doctoral College Administration.

4. Panel membership

4.1 Periodic review requires detailed scrutiny of a pre-defined set of documentary evidence by a panel specifically constituted for this purpose. The membership of the panel comprises:

- The Chair (the Director of the Doctoral College) (or nominee).
- An External Adviser (also see paragraph 5.2 of this Policy).
- The Faculty Director of a Graduate School from a Faculty external to that being reviewed.
- A representative from the Students' Union with responsibility for PGR matters (e.g. the SUSU Vice President Education & Democracy).
- An Associate Director from the Office of the Academic Registrar or from Student and Education Services.
- A representative (with responsibility for PGR matters) from QSAT.

4.2 The secretary to the panel will be appointed from within QSAT and will be responsible for preparing the panel's report of the review.

5. The External Adviser

5.1 The role of the External Adviser is to provide academic and professional expertise to the periodic review process, identifying good practice, areas for enhancement and informing continuous improvement. The External Adviser is expected to be an active participant throughout the process and to attend the review.

5.2   The External Adviser should be an individual who holds a senior position at another higher education institution with responsibility for overseeing PGR degree provision in one or more of the disciplines which overlap with the Faculty being reviewed. The nominee should not normally have participated in the doctoral examining process at the University of Southampton within the previous five years (either as an internal or external examiner).

5.3   Responsibility for identifying and recommending a suitable nominee to the role of External Adviser rests with the Faculty Director of the Graduate School within the Faculty that is subject to review, although advice and guidance may be sought from the Director of the Doctoral College. It is usual practice for the Faculty Director of the Graduate School to informally approach the proposed nominee to ascertain their willingness and availability to serve in the role of External Adviser.

5.4   The Faculty Director of the Graduate School should complete the *External Adviser Nomination Form* which should then be submitted to the QSAT. The nomination must be approved by the Director of the Doctoral College (in their capacity as chair of the periodic review panel) prior to the *External Adviser Appointment Letter* being sent to the nominee. This letter sets out the terms of the appointment which should be formally accepted by the nominee.

5.5   Following receipt of the Faculty's submission (see section 6 of this Policy), the External Adviser is required to prepare a written commentary and identify any issues that, in their view, should be considered (the *External Adviser's Report*). This report should be submitted to QSAT no later than five working days in advance of the review.

5.6   The External Adviser is paid a fee of £700[1]. The fee will be funded by and paid to the External Adviser by the Doctoral College following the completion of the review. Reasonable accommodation, travel and subsistence expenses (in line with University policy) are funded by the Faculty.

6.   The Faculty's self-evaluative report and supporting evidence

6.1   The Faculty Director of the Graduate School is responsible for preparing the *Faculty self-evaluative report*. The report should provide an overview of the

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[1] Effective February 2020.

Faculty's PGR degree provision and evaluate its operation and performance over a pre-defined five-year period and should include a commentary (supported by evidence) on the following:

- the research environment and culture;
- recruitment, selection and admission;
- induction, research and transferable skills training, professional and career development;
- ethical considerations;
- supervision;
- progression monitoring and reviews;
- nominal registration;
- submission, examination and award;
- student feedback and engagement;
- education partnerships and distance-learning delivery;
- Centre for Doctoral Training (CDT)/Doctoral Training Partnership (DTP) delivery;
- academic governance, administration, and staffing resources.

6.2 The report should also identify any issues that have arisen, noting where actions to resolve them are being taken by the Faculty, or where the Faculty considers that University-level input is required.

6.3 Feedback should be sought from students, supervisors, and members of the Faculty Graduate School directorate so as to provide further context to the evaluation. Wherever possible, and to support the statements made, the report should cross-reference to the supporting evidence.

6.4 Where there is a significant body of students, it is acceptable to present the commentary at School-level. However, the evaluation must also provide a detailed commentary on Faculty coherence and oversight.

6.5 The Faculty Director of the Graduate School is also responsible for co-ordinating the preparation of the Faculty's supporting evidence. This should include:

- The report and action plan from the most recent periodic review of PGR degree provision within the Faculty. Should Faculty groupings have changed (e.g. following a restructure), the report and action plans from the most recent periodic review of PGR degree provision for all

disciplines aligned to the current Faculty structure must be sourced and made available.

- The University-level Doctoral programme profile for the current academic year.

- Programme specifications for the current academic year for all research degrees with a substantial taught component (e.g. integrated PhD, professional doctorate), together with a summary which reflects any substantive changes that have been made to the programme(s) within the five-year period since the most recent periodic review.

- Annual monitoring reports and action plans (including education partnership reports and all reports to DTP/CDT funders), reflecting on the five-year period since the most recent periodic review.

- An analysis of statistical data[2] and associated trends collected via the annual monitoring process and which reflect on the period since the most recent periodic review, and whether these numbers are in line with expectations for:

  o **Recruitment and admissions**
    The number of applicants, number of offers made vs rejections, the number of students admitted.

  o **Student numbers**
    The total number of students enrolled on the doctoral programmes(s).

  o **Progression reviews**
    The number and percentage of students who have submitted work on time for their review, the number and percentage of students who passed their review at the first attempt, the number and percentage of students whose review has not yet been fully completed, and the number and percentage of students who failed their review following a second attempt.

  o **Termination of studies and student withdrawal**

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[2] Existing available data sources (e.g. Qlikview (https://qlikview.soton.ac.uk/qlikview)) or other prepared data should be used to aid reflection. Should any support be required with sourcing data, the Head of Doctoral College Administration is equipped to advise.

The number and percentage of terminations and withdrawals, the reasons for this and any identified trends, including actions taken where concern exists.

- o **Nominal registration**

  The number and percentage of students approved and rejected for transfer to nominal registration, and the period of time students spent in nominal registration before submitting their thesis for examination.

- o **Special consideration and pause in study**

  The number and type of requests (and, where a pause in study was requested, the number due to/unrelated to extenuating circumstances), the number of approvals and rejections made, and any notable or systemic issues identified by the Special Considerations Board.

- o **Examination timescales and outcomes**

  The number and percentage of students whose examination process was completed within three months of submission, the number of students who were recommended for their doctoral-level award immediately following examination, those who were required to undertake minor or modest amendments, the number of students required to resubmit, and the number of students who achieved a lesser award (e.g. MPhil) or who failed.

- o **Completion rates**

  Reflecting on the period from start to submission, submission to viva voce and viva voce to award.

- The Faculty's action plan which was developed following the five-year period since the most recent periodic review, and which has been subject to continuous review.

- The terms of reference and agendas for the four most recent meetings of:

  - o Faculty Graduate School Subcommittee
  - o PGR Student-Staff Liaison Committee
  - o School Programmes Committees
  - o Faculty Education and Student Experience Subcommittee

The University's PGR Handbook (and supplementary information on the Faculty and the Doctoral College) is published on [Sharepoint](#) and should be referenced within the Faculty's self-evaluative report.

6.6 The Faculty Director of the Graduate School should ensure that the self-evaluative report and supporting evidence is submitted to QSAT not later than twenty working days in advance of the date of the review. Supporting evidence must be referenced and indexed within the self-evaluative report. Electronic or paper files must be clearly named.

6.7 Upon receipt, the Faculty's submission will be disseminated to the panel.

7. Scrutiny of the documentation

7.1 In advance of the review, all members of the panel should familiarise themselves with the Faculty's submission (the self-evaluative report and supporting evidence) and the External Adviser's Report so as to gain an initial impression of the Faculty's research degree provision and to identify the areas that should be further explored during the review.

7.2 The panel will share their initial impressions and identify lines of inquiry during its preliminary meeting (see paragraph 8.3 of this Policy).

7.3 The panel reserves the right to request the Faculty Director of the Graduate School to submit additional information or to provide clarification on any matters pertinent to the review at any time up to five working days in advance of the date of the review.

8. The review

8.1 Given the complexity of Faculty structures and operations, the review should be scheduled to take place over a full day to permit sufficient time for the panel to engage in discussion with Faculty representatives, supervisors, students, and alumni, to undertake its own deliberations and to visit facilities should the panel consider this to be beneficial. The review of a large and complex Faculty may need to be conducted over two full days.

8.2 The panel will wish to meet with:

- members of the Faculty Graduate School directorate (as described in the [Definition of Terms](#);
- the Faculty Senior Tutor (where role exists);

- supervisors;
- students (including the lead representative to the Faculty Student-Staff Liaison Committee);
- alumni; and
- the Doctoral College (Faculty) Team Leader.

The panel may also wish to meet with other colleagues involved in the delivery and administration of the Faculty's research degrees (e.g. the Faculty Senior Tutor, CDT/DTP Directors and/or Managers) and to engage with industry or external partners where relevant). It is the Faculty's responsibility to identify and confirm representation and attendance, consulting with QSAT, as necessary.

8.3   To assist the Chair of the panel in setting the agenda for the review, a suggested timetable is provided below. The structure and timings may be varied, depending upon the requirements of the review:

08:45 - 9:45*	Preliminary meeting of the panel to share initial impressions arising from the self-evaluative report, supporting evidence and External Adviser's Report, and to identify lines of inquiry
09:45 – 11:15	Panel to meet with members of the Faculty Graduate School directorate, the Faculty Senior Tutor (where role exists), and the Doctoral College (Faculty) Team Leader. Other colleagues (as specified in paragraph 8.2 of this Policy) may also be invited to attend.
11:15 – 11:30	Break
11:30 – 12:45	Panel to meet with students (including the lead representative to the Faculty Student-Staff Liaison Committee) and alumni
12:45 – 13:30	Lunch** (for the panel, Faculty representatives, students, and alumni)
13:30 – 14:15	Private panel meeting to share views and identify emerging issues of concern and/or good practice

14:15 – 15:30	Panel to meet with supervisors
15:30 – 15:45	Break
15:45 – 16:15	Private panel meeting to confirm its findings and to prepare initial feedback
16:15 – 17:00	Panel to meet with the members of the Faculty Graduate School directorate to communicate initial feedback

* Should schedules permit, the panel may prefer to hold its preliminary meeting the day prior to the review.

** Catering arrangements for breaks and lunch will be co-ordinated by the secretary to the panel, with costs charged to the Faculty being reviewed.

8.4 Meeting with the Faculty Graduate School directorate (and other colleagues)

8.4.1 The panel may to wish to explore:

- the alignment of PGR degree activity with University and Faculty research strategy;
- practical arrangements for managing and monitoring student admission, progress and assessment;
- training and support for supervisors and examiners;
- the supervisor's role (concerns, good practice and support for enhancement);
- access to funding and other resources for research students;
- areas for development in relation to current research in the University and externally;
- the research environment and research culture within the Faculty, and the integration of research students within it;
- anything else which the panel or the Faculty wish to raise and which falls within the scope of the review.

8.5 Meeting with students and alumni

8.5.1 The Faculty Director of the Graduate School should make every effort to ensure that the panel has opportunity to meet with a broad sample of students (minimum: 6) and alumni, encompassing all disciplines, applicable

modes of provision (full-time, part-time, distance learning and education partnerships) and types of programmes (e.g. standard-route PhD, integrated PhD, professional doctorates, programmes funded by CDTs/DTPs). All students irrespective of their mode of provision should be given the opportunity to attend (utilising videoconference where required). The Faculty Director of the Graduate School is responsible for identifying and securing those individuals who are to meet with the panel, and they may wish to consult SUSU's Vice-President (Education and Democracy) who may be able to provide assistance.

8.5.2 The panel may wish to explore:

- pre-entry information and the application process;

- induction;

- training and research skills development (including mandatory, generic and subject-specific provision);

- understanding of their programme of study and its requirements, including the skills developed;

- the quality of supervision and the options available to a student if the relationship with the supervisor breaks down;

- learning support materials and resources (including library, IT, use of Blackboard, PGR Manager, handbooks, subject-specific resources such as labs);

- the assessment process – whether students understand what is required, are aware of the assessment criteria;

- support for students with particular problems – disabilities, English language problems, personal difficulties, etc;

- opportunities to give feedback individually or as a group including the role of student representatives;

- wider academic and social activities including postgraduate conferences and other opportunities to engage in the wider research activity of the Faculty.

8.6 **Meeting with supervisors**

8.6.1 The Faculty Director of the Graduate School should make every effort to ensure that the panel has opportunity to meet with a broad sample of

supervisors (minimum: 8 to 10), encompassing representation from each School/research group, and differing levels of supervisory experience.

8.6.2 The panel may wish to explore:

- information and guidance for supervisors;

- models of supervisor workload management;

- training for supervisors (both new and established);

- supervisors' understanding of their responsibilities;

- support offered to students;

- the research environment for students and supervisors;

- supervisors' perceptions of the research student experience.

9.   Panel report

9.1   Referencing the aim and scope of the review, the *Panel Report* will set out the panel's findings. The report will confirm whether the quality of the PGR degrees and the student experience offered and delivered by the Faculty is compliant with the University's General Academic Regulations for Research Students (and, specifically, the Regulations for Research Degrees and the Code of Practice for Research Degree Candidature and Supervision. The report will specify requirements and will also set out recommendations, commendations, and any matters that require consideration at University-level.

9.2   Not later than 10 working days following the date of the review, the secretary will draft the report, circulating it to the panel for comment.

9.3   The secretary will send the agreed draft of the report to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School, who will be asked to undertake a fact-check against information sourced from the self-evaluative report that has been referenced in the draft.

9.4   Once agreed, the secretary will circulate the final report to the Faculty Director of the Graduate School who must arrange for it to be presented to the Faculty Graduate School Subcommittee and for the Faculty-level action plan to be developed. A copy of the report will also be sent to the Dean of the Faculty.

9.5   The Faculty Director of the Graduate School will submit the Faculty-level action plan to QSAT which will arrange for the finalised report and the

Faculty-level action plan to be accepted into record by PGR QME Subcommittee and the Doctoral College Committee.

9.6   The Doctoral College Committee is responsible for leading and directing the development of the PGR student experience and environment at the University of Southampton. As such, it holds responsibility for monitoring the progress of the Faculty-level action plan, which will remain under consideration until deemed complete.

9.7   The Doctoral College Committee will task PGR QME Subcommittee with actioning any University-level quality assurance matters that have been identified through the periodic review process.

10.   Reflection and feedback

10.1   To inform enhancements to process, the secretary to the panel will write to all participants of the review to ask for their feedback on the operation of the periodic review.

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