



Aston University

BIRMINGHAM UK

Code of Practice for Research Degrees

AU-GSMC-22-5492-A

Applicable to postgraduate students in all years of
research degree programmes

2023-4

CONTENTS

Summary of Key Changes for 2023/4	3
1 Foreword	4
2 Definitions	4
2.1 Research	4
2.2 Research Programmes	4
3 Institutional Arrangements	5
3.1 Governance	5
3.2 Regulations	6
3.3 Target Setting and Monitoring	6
4 The Research Environment	7
5 Selection, Admission and Induction of Students	9
5.1 Selection and Admission	9
5.2 Induction	10
6 Supervision	11
6.1 Responsibilities of Supervisors	13
6.2 Responsibilities of Research Students	14
7 Progress and Review Arrangements	16
8 Development of Research and other Skills	17
9 Evaluation Mechanisms	17
10 Assessment	18
11 Complaints And Appeals	20

Policy Summary

The Code of Practice for Research Degrees defines minimum standards for research degree programmes, including:

- Selection, admission and induction.
- Responsibilities of Supervisors and of research students.
- Arrangements for progress and review.
- Research training and development.

Related Regulations, Policies, and Guidance

These general regulations should be read in conjunction with the University's [General Regulations for Degrees by Research and Thesis](#) and the [General Regulations for the Presentation of Theses](#)

General regulations for other types of programmes operated by the University are available on the website: [General Regulations \(aston.ac.uk\)](#).

Where Regulations are included in the text of this Code of Practice, they are shown in shaded boxes. Unless indicated otherwise, references are to the [General Regulations for Degrees by Research and Thesis](#)

Version Control

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This document is reviewed annually; please ensure you are referring to the current version, which takes precedence over earlier versions.

Summary of key changes and/or additions to this document for 2023/4

Section		Page
6.1m	Supervision: Clarification of responsibility of supervisors to complete compulsory training	14

1 Foreword

This document is one of a suite of inter-related documents which forms an overall institutional policy for the conduct of research degrees, and which includes the institutional response to the Expectations and Core Practices set out in the UK Quality Code for Higher Education as they apply to research degrees. University staff and students are expected to be familiar with the sections of the University Code of Practice that are particularly relevant to their own responsibilities. The University Code defines minimum standards for research degrees which may be supplemented at the College level by additional advice. Unless stated otherwise, where Regulations are referred to in the text the references are to the [General Regulations for Degrees by Research and Thesis](#).

2 Definitions

2.1 Research

The definition of research in this document draws on the definition used for the purposes of the Research Excellence Framework (REF)¹ which defines research as.

‘a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared.’

‘It **includes** work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce, industry, culture, society and to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship²; the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances, artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights; and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes, including design and construction. It excludes routine testing and routine analysis of materials, components and processes such as for the maintenance of national standards, as distinct from the development of new analytical techniques. It also excludes the development of teaching materials that do not embody original research.’

‘It **includes** research that is published, disseminated or made publicly available in the form of assessable research outputs, and confidential reports (as defined in paragraph 26.1).’

2.2 Research Programmes

This University Code of Practice is intended to apply to the wide range of research degree qualifications offered by the University, including MPhil, MD, PhD, professional doctorates (e.g. DBA, DOptom), and the University award of MSc/MA (by Research), although not all sections of the document apply equally to all types of research programme.

¹ www.ref.ac.uk; Publication REF 2019/01 ‘Guidance on submissions’.

² Scholarship for the REF is defined as the creation, development and maintenance of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines, in forms such as dictionaries, scholarly editions, catalogues and contributions to major research databases.’ Journal articles and monographs are also important forms of scholarship.

3 Institutional Arrangements

3.1 Governance

Dean of the Graduate School

The Dean of the Graduate School has oversight of research degree provision across the University.

Graduate School Management Committee

The Dean of the Graduate School chairs the Graduate School Management Committee (GSMC) which is a sub-committee of the University Research Committee. GSMC is responsible, amongst other things, for:

- considering and making recommendations on all matters concerning the regulation, assurance and enhancement of the quality and standards of research degree programmes including the supervision and examination of research students; and
- monitoring the extent and effectiveness of provision of research training, supervision and other support for research students.

GSMC has academic staff and research student representation from each College, plus representation from central areas that support research students.

Associate Dean Research

The role of the Associate Dean Research in each College is to support the College's Executive Dean in matters relating to research, including in respect of research degree programmes.

College Research Committee

The College Research Committee is normally chaired by the Associate Dean Research. This Committee considers matters relating to research degree programmes and students in the College and may make recommendations to GSMC. There is a student representative on the College Research Committee.

Programme Director

Each College has a Director of Research Degree Programmes who has day-to-day responsibility for research degree programmes and students in the College. In addition, professional doctorates with a taught element have a Programme Director.

Postgraduate Research Tutor

Each College also has a Postgraduate Research Tutor who is a member of academic staff independent of the supervisory team, the Associate Dean Research and the Director of Research Degree Programmes, and from whom advice can be sought, for example if the supervisory relationship is not working well or in case of welfare issues. Students may seek advice from any of the College Postgraduate Research Tutors.

3.2 Regulations

Regulations in respect of research degrees are approved by the University Research Committee (acting with delegated authority from the Senate) on the recommendation of the Graduate School Management Committee. Regulations cover:

- a. requirements for admission to the programme;
- b. procedures for considering claims for the recognition of prior learning (RPL);
- c. the academic and procedural requirements for research awards, including supervisory arrangements;
- d. the requirements for progression, including monitoring and review arrangements for the award, and the minimum and maximum periods within which the programme may be completed;
- e. assessment methods, requirements and procedures, including the criteria for achieving the award;
- f. procedures for dealing with research misconduct;³
- g. information on the University's complaints and appeals processes.

In addition to the [General Regulations for Degrees by Research and Thesis](#), there are also [General Regulations for Research Degrees by Staff of Aston University and by Aston University Graduates, including DSc and PhD by Previously Published Work](#). These Regulations cover: staff candidates for MPhil, MD and PhD; the degrees of Doctor of Science and Doctor of Letters; and the PhD by Previously Published Work.

General Regulations on the [General Regulations for the Presentation of Theses](#) provide guidance on the submission of the thesis for examination and after the examination.

The Regulations and codes of practice for research degrees are available to staff, students, applicants, graduates and examiners via the [Graduate School](#) website. They are also available on the My Aston Portal (MAP) homepage of enrolled students.

3.3 Target Setting and Monitoring

- a. Recruitment targets for research degrees are proposed by the Colleges in co-operation with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor Research and agreed by the University Executive; achievement towards targets is monitored by Associate Deans Research and by Graduate School Management Committee.
- b. Graduate School Management Committee receives a number of reports to monitor research degree provision, including:

³ covered in more detail in the University's [Research Misconduct Policy](#) (previously known as the Research Integrity Assurance Procedures).

- i. annual report, by full-time and part-time cohort, of awards and completion times, and withdrawals;
 - ii. annual report on student appeals;
 - iii. annual summary of comments from External Examiners;
 - iv. employment destinations of research students;
 - v. [Postgraduate Research Experience Survey](#) (PRES) results.
- c. Research degree programmes are reviewed on an annual basis by College Research Committees in accordance with the [procedures for the evaluation of research degree programmes](#). Factors to be considered by the College Research Committees through this process include:
 - i. recruitment profiles; submission and completion times and rates; pass, referral and fail rates; withdrawal rates;
 - ii. analysis of comments from External Examiners;
 - iii. feedback from research students, graduates and external stakeholders;
 - iv. provision of research and generic skills training;
 - v. any appeals or complaints dealt with at the College level.

The University's Research Committee, through the Graduate School Management Committee, ensures that these factors have been given due attention.

- d. A College's research degree provision is subject to [periodic review](#) every six years. The periodic review panel includes at least two members who are external to the University and a student member from a different College. The review panel meets with academic and support staff involved with the programmes, and with research students.

4 The Research Environment

The University is committed to accepting research students only into an environment that provides support for doing and learning about research, where excellent research, recognised by the relevant subject community, is occurring and where the appropriate conditions for admission can be met.

'Common features of an effective research environment include:

- originality, significance and rigour of research outputs recognised through peer review or through the award of grants resulting in outputs such as journal publications, books and work produced in other media
- capacity of research-active staff (including postdoctoral researchers and research students)

- knowledge exchange and impacts (including knowledge transfer partnerships) with an emphasis on the practical impact of research outcomes and demonstrable ability to attract external funding' (from UK Quality Code for Higher Education, Research Degrees, Guiding Principle 2).

Maintaining integrity and high standards is of central importance to the University. All members of the University's research community are responsible for maintaining professional standards. The University's [Research Integrity](#) Policy, prescribes standards of work performance and conduct expected of all persons engaged in research at the University.

Research students are supported by a Graduate Development Team, comprising experts from different areas (including Library Services, Careers+Placements, Research and Knowledge Exchange) who collectively provide a range of training and development opportunities for research students and research staff.

5 Selection, Admission and Induction of Students

5.1 Selection and Admission

The selection of research students must follow the requirements set out in the Regulations and any additional criteria set by the College and approved by the appropriate College Research Committee and the Graduate School Management Committee. The admissions criteria should be available to applicants both via the [University website](#) and in printed form. The selection of students should take into account any declared additional needs the student may have, and consideration of how such needs may be supported.

Prior to interview, applicants should be provided with details of the [Support Services](#) and asked whether they require any measures/adjustments to be put in place in order to support a disability or additional need. Applicants should be advised that, depending on the nature of the support requested, their disability/additional need may need to be disclosed to other interview panel members.

Applicants should be interviewed, in English, if necessary by telephone or online, and should be invited to visit the University. Wherever possible, applicants should have the opportunity to meet with relevant staff and students.

Interviews should be conducted by the potential Supervisor and a person independent of the proposed supervisory team – Colleges may specify additional requirements for the composition of the interview panel. Consideration should be given to the diversity of the panel. Between them, the panel members are expected to have undertaken the University's training in: recruitment and selection; [equality and diversity](#); and [unconscious bias](#). All prospective supervisors are required to undertake the research student supervisor training (see [Section 6](#) of this Code) and at least one panel member's training in this area must be up-to-date at the time of the interview. Offer letters will not be issued to applicants unless all members of the proposed supervisory team have completed research student supervisor training within the previous three years.

Consideration of applications should include: whether the proposed area of research will sustain the required level of investigation for the research degree concerned; whether the proposed research can be expected to be completed within the duration permitted for the research degree concerned; the continued availability of required resources, including appropriate supervision, throughout the degree. It may be helpful to include a skills-based assessment in the interview, such as: a demonstration of practical techniques; understanding of methodology; or questions based on a journal article distributed in advance of the interview.

Students may only be admitted to a research degree programme with the involvement of at least two members of University staff, one of whom must be the College's Associate Dean Research or their nominee. Students may only be admitted to the University if their application has been approved by the College's Associate Dean Research or their nominee.

Students must be sent a formal offer letter which should normally include the following:

- a. the expected duration of study;
- b. the expectations of the student in terms of attendance, progress reports, contact with supervisors;
- c. arrangements for enrolment;
- d. references to the University's Regulations, Code of Practice for Research Degrees, sources of funding;
- e. a clear indication of the financial costs of the programme;
- f. the requirements and conditions of any sponsor (if known);
- g. reference to practical information, for example concerning accommodation and financial or travel information;
- h. the terms and conditions of offer.

Other information to be provided early in the students' attendance includes:

- a. details of health and safety procedures;
- b. University Regulations;
- c. Graduate School Student Handbook, including School-specific information;
- d. an outline of any opportunities to undertake teaching or other duties and any conditions associated with these, including training requirements;
- e. good practice in research and guidance on research ethics;⁴
- f. guidance on intellectual property rights.

5.2 Induction

Students will be provided with an appropriate induction programme and introductory material providing details about where they can find essential information. This will include a cross-College Induction to the Graduate School, as well as separate College-specific induction events. The Graduate School induction will comprise presentations from, as a minimum, the Dean of the Graduate School, areas represented by the Graduate Development Team, and the [Aston Postgraduate Research Society](#) (APRS). College induction events will provide an opportunity to meet key staff and other research students.

The student should meet their Supervisor at the earliest opportunity to discuss their respective responsibilities. The Learning Agreement may form the basis of this

⁴ See [Research Integrity Policy](#) and [Aston Research Data Management Policy](#)

meeting. For distance learning research students and other students who are away from the campus for a significant part of their research, appropriate arrangements for regular contact will be established.

6 Supervision

Every research student must be supervised by a Supervisor who is a member of the Academic Staff of the University, as defined in Section 1 of the Statutes or by an appropriately qualified and experienced senior Research Fellow. Research Fellows may only be appointed as Supervisor when their contract extends beyond the expected thesis submission date of the student. A Teaching Fellow with a doctorate may be Supervisor for a student with the qualification aim of DBA, subject to the approval of the Associate Dean Research. The Academic Staff Supervisor of an MD student will additionally have experience of research involving human participants and/or human tissue and appropriate academic scientific expertise to support Protocol development and delivery of the study. For students following the Doctor of Business Administration, a Process Supervisor will be appointed for the taught element of the programme; the Process Supervisor will fulfil the role of Supervisor until the supervisory team is appointed. (*Regulation 6.1a*)

The Supervisor should have the appropriate skills and subject knowledge to support, encourage and monitor research students effectively.

Research Fellows and other staff on employment contracts that include a 'significant responsibility for research' are considered eligible for supervision of research degrees.

Teaching Fellows and other teaching staff that do not have a significant responsibility for research in their contract of employment and/or are not returned to REF are considered eligible to undertake supervision responsibilities in an Associate role.

A research student's supervision should normally be supplemented by at least one Associate Supervisor who is a member of the Academic Staff. A Teaching Fellow with a doctorate may be Associate Supervisor for a student with the qualification aim of DBA, subject to the approval of the Associate Dean Research. Additional Associate Supervisors may be appointed in appropriate circumstances. (*Regulation 6.3*)

The role of any Associate Supervisor(s) will be clarified at an initial meeting with the student and documented in a Learning Agreement (see [Section 6.2](#) of this Code).

No person may be the Supervisor for more than six research students at any time without the agreement of the Associate Dean Research; this number should be proportionate for part-time staff. (*Regulation 6.1f*)

The Associate Dean Research will review the situation, taking account of the overall workload of the member of staff concerned and the extent to which Associate Supervisors have been appointed.

A Supervisor who has not previously supervised a doctoral candidate to successful completion will not normally supervise more than three research students. (*Regulation 6.1f*)

Supervisors who have not supervised at least four students to successful doctoral completion at the time of their appointment to Aston must attend the University's training session on research student supervision. Supervisors who have such supervisory experience will be inducted into Aston procedures and policies by appropriate College and Graduate School staff and are expected to undertake the online 'update' training. The Associate Dean Research or nominee in each School must appoint an Associate Supervisor for a Supervisor who has not previously supervised a research student to successful completion.

A Supervisor who has not previously supervised a doctoral candidate to successful completion will be supported by an Associate Supervisor who is a member of the Academic Staff who has supervised a doctoral student to successful completion as main Supervisor. (*Regulation 6.1d*)

The University expects that all Supervisors will take the initiative to update their knowledge and skills on a regular basis and access 'update' training at least once every three years.

All research students must be given the name and contact details of at least one other member of Academic Staff from whom they may seek advice and support in the absence or unavailability of the main Supervisor, or in circumstances where a student finds the student/Supervisor relationship is not working well. (*Regulation 6.1g*)

This member of Academic Staff may be from outside the specific area of the student's research topic. The same appointment would normally continue throughout a student's full period of study. (*Regulation 6.1h*)

In the event that a Supervisor leaves the University during a student's research programme, every effort will be made to appoint an alternative Supervisor and, where possible and appropriate, to retain the involvement of the original Supervisor as an Associate Supervisor.

The names and contact details of a student's Supervisor, Associate Supervisor(s) and College Postgraduate Research Tutor are displayed on the student's MAP homepage.

6.1 Responsibilities of Supervisors

The responsibilities of Supervisors include:

- a. introducing the research student to the research environment, its facilities and operational procedures, and to other research students and relevant staff;
- b. providing satisfactory, accurate and ongoing guidance and advice, and giving consideration to the appointment of additional Associate Supervisor(s) where this may be beneficial as the student's research progresses;
- c. being responsible for monitoring the student's progress, mindful of the timing of the student's progression points and thesis submission date;
- d. establishing and maintaining regular contact, at a frequency agreed with the student (normally at least every two weeks), and including structured interactions at least every 3 months to discuss and agree progress, and to report it formally (Regulation 8.1);
- e. ensuring their reasonable accessibility to the student at other appropriate times when the student needs advice;
- f. having input into the assessment of a student's development needs and regularly reviewing and amending those needs and advising students on their personal development planning;
- g. providing timely, constructive and effective feedback on the student's work, including their overall progress;
- h. ensuring that the student is made aware of lack of satisfactory progress on the research programme and the implications of this for the student;
- i. ensuring that the student is aware of the need to conduct their research according to ethical principles, respecting any issues of confidentiality, and of the implications of research misconduct⁵, including plagiarism;
- j. providing guidance on the maintenance of research records applicable to the nature of the research;
- k. providing effective pastoral support and/or referring the student to other sources of such support, including student advisers, Graduate School staff, the Postgraduate Research Tutor and, where appropriate, support for mental health and well-being;
- l. helping the student to interact with others working in the field of research, for example, encouraging the student to attend relevant conferences and supporting them in seeking funding for such events, or in potential career

⁵covered in more detail in the University's [Research Misconduct Policy](#) (previously known as the Research Integrity Assurance Procedures)

pathways; and, where appropriate, giving encouragement and guidance on the submission of conference papers and articles to refereed journals;

- m. maintaining the necessary supervisory expertise, including the appropriate skills, to perform the role of Supervisor satisfactorily, completing all compulsory training as required by the University within the appropriate timeline, supported by relevant continuing professional development opportunities.

6.2 Responsibilities of research students

Students are responsible for the content, completion and submission for examination of their thesis within the periods of study as prescribed in Regulations for their particular degree.

Students are also responsible for:

- a. taking responsibility for their own personal and professional development and attending induction programmes as advised by their Supervisor or the Graduate School;
- b. ensuring that they are familiar with and comply with: University Regulations and College guidelines and procedures relating to their degree; relevant Codes of Practice and other University and College requirements (including health and safety advice, intellectual property and ethical research); the monitoring of progress; and terms of any sponsorship;
- c. 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;
- d. ensuring that in every year of enrolment they meet all of the University's requirements regarding administrative arrangements; for example, completing enrolment, re-enrolment and annual reports on progress;
- e. discussing with their Supervisor the type of guidance and feedback they find most helpful, and agreeing a schedule of meetings for which they adequately prepare;
- f. maintaining regular contact, normally at least every two weeks, with their Supervisor and initiating supervisory meetings where necessary;
- g. in conjunction with their Supervisor and informed by the Vitae Researcher Development Statement⁶, identifying their training needs and attending training on research methods and other relevant topics, including personal and skills development opportunities;
- h. maintaining research records in such a way that they can be accessed and understood by anyone with a legitimate need to see them;

⁶ The Vitae Researcher Development Statement (RDS) is provided as an Appendix to the Student Handbook. Detailed information about the RDS and the associated Researcher Development Framework (RDF) is available on the Vitae website (www.vitae.ac.uk/rdf).

- i. deciding when to submit their thesis (after the minimum period of research and before the end of the maximum period of research specified in the Regulations), taking due account of the Supervisor's opinion;
- j. ensuring that they understand the nature of their Supervisor's responsibilities (see [Section 6.1](#) above);
- k. advising their supervisors of any illness, holidays or any other occasions when they will be absent from the University or from their study, or of any other circumstances or concerns likely to affect their work;
- l. where possible, recognising when they need help and seeking it in a timely manner;
- m. seeking advice from an International Advisor in The Hub if they have any queries about their student visa or immigration status (*international students only*).

Supervisors and students will complete individual Learning Agreements as an aide memoire to covering these points and as a document for future reference. A Training Needs Analysis will be completed at the same time as the Learning Agreement and will be reviewed at least annually. Template forms are provided in the Student Handbook and in the [Forms and Applications](#) folder on Blackboard.

7 Progress and Review Arrangements

Each student and their Supervisor are expected to be in regular contact, meeting, or interacting over a distance, normally at least every two weeks on average. At least every three months a student's progress should be formally reviewed by the Supervisor. Prior to the meeting, the student will be expected to provide the Supervisor with a detailed report of their progress during the previous three months, including, where appropriate, the methods used and the results obtained from their research. The recorded outcomes of the meetings, or other interaction if students are studying at some distance from the University, will be held on MAP. A template Record of Supervisory meeting form is provided in the Student Handbook and in the [Forms and Applications](#) folder on Blackboard and is available to download from MAP.

At the end of each year of research a report must be submitted to the Associate Dean Research on the performance of each research student, including details of the skills training undertaken by the student during the year and a review of forthcoming training needs, unless the student has been granted an exemption from skills training or completed it as part of a professional doctorate programme. (*Regulation 8.2a*)

For MPhil/PhD students, the annual report before the end of the first full-time year or second part-time year of research will contain a recommendation concerning the student's progression to either the MPhil or PhD degree programme, based on the student's Qualifying Report on the research work and a *viva voce* examination (see Regulations, Section 8: Reports). A Guide to Requirements for the Qualifying Report is provided in the Student Handbook. Professional Doctorate students will have a similar progression point specified for their programme. Doctor of Medicine (MD) students enrol on the MD programme from the outset and submit a Qualifying Report to determine continued progression on the programme.

Before the end of the second year (fourth year for part-time students) PhD and professional doctorate students are required to complete a minimum of: an oral presentation of all or part of their research; *or* write up all or part of their research as a paper (without the requirement to submit for publication); *or* write up all or part of their research in the form of an empirical chapter that would constitute part of their thesis. The Supervisor will consult with the student about which task the student is expected to complete and structured feedback will be provided. The student is expected to write a brief report on what they have gained from completing the task. Template feedback forms for each of the progression tasks are included in the Student Handbook. The Graduate School is responsible for the monitoring of student performance and notifies students of their review timetable and of the outcomes of the key stages above.

The Regulations allow for leave of absence in appropriate circumstances (e.g. evidenced illness) and for an extension of up to 12 months beyond the normal duration of the research programme to finalise the submission of the thesis (subject to approval by the College Research Committee). Detailed information about the processes to be followed is contained in Student Handbooks.

8 Development of Research and Other Skills

The University considers skills training to be key to the development of independent, employable, researchers, and students are therefore expected to complete a minimum number of skills training hours during their research programme, as defined in Regulations and as agreed with their Supervisor during completion and review of the Training Needs Analysis. A list of the training undertaken is sent to the Examiners before the *viva voce* examination.

For professional doctorate programmes, the taught element of each programme satisfies the requirement for skills hours but students are nevertheless encouraged to take advantage of the additional opportunities available for personal development.

The University will provide training in research and generic skills appropriate, wherever possible, to a student's individual needs and as identified in the Training Needs Analysis initiated at the beginning of the first year as part of the Learning Agreement and reviewed at least annually thereafter. Training will normally be provided by the Colleges, and by the Graduate Development Team. Provision of skills training will be kept under review by Colleges as part of their annual review of research degree programmes, and by the Graduate School Management Committee.

Guidance, support and training will be provided to, and will be expected to be undertaken by, students who have opportunities for teaching, demonstrating and/or assessing. Details of how to access teaching/demonstrating opportunities in each College are provided in the Student Handbook.

9 Evaluation Mechanisms

As part of the annual programme evaluation process, Colleges will consider and, where necessary, respond to feedback from research students, graduates, examiners, employers, sponsors and other internal and external stakeholders. College Programme Evaluation Reports are subsequently considered by the Graduate School Management Committee.

Students will be given the opportunity to provide confidential individual feedback as well as the opportunity to take part in College and University committee meetings. Students will be informed of actions taken in response to their feedback.

Feedback from research students will be sought through the national [Postgraduate Research Experience Survey](#) (PRES) administered by [Advance HE](#). Students will be provided with feedback on the PRES results.

The Dean of the Graduate School will meet regularly with the [Aston Postgraduate Research Society](#) (APRS) Committee providing the opportunity for discussion with research student representatives from each College.

10 Assessment

The assessment of students is on the basis of an appropriate body of work, as specified in the Regulations for that award, and a *viva voce* examination conducted according to the guidance set out in the Conduct of the *viva voce* in the [General Regulations for Degrees by Research and Thesis](#). The requirements for the award are stated in Regulations and reference the [Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland](#) (FHEQ) doctoral qualification and master's degree descriptors.

Two Examiners are appointed for each student candidate and one Examiner must be external to the University. In the case of staff candidates, both Examiners must be external to the University.

The Internal Examiner may not be the student's Supervisor, an Associate Supervisor, or be otherwise involved in the supervision of the student e.g. a member of a supervisory team. (*Regulation 16.1d*)

The Examiners' role is critical in the assessment of research degrees, not only for the individual candidate but also for assuring the quality of the University's academic standards, and the Regulations specify detailed criteria for their appointment. All Examiners must be appropriately experienced in research as judged by the Associate Dean Research and a nominee of the Senate.

Research Fellows and other staff on employment contracts that include a 'significant responsibility for research' are considered eligible for examination of research degrees.

Teaching Fellows and other teaching staff that do not have a significant responsibility for research in their contract of employment and/or are not returned to REF are not eligible for appointment as examiner.

Each Examiner must have previous experience of successful PhD supervision as the principal supervisor [and] the examination team must have experience (i.e. normally three or more previous examinations) of examining doctoral research degree students. (*Regulations 16.1g and 16.1h*)

Recommendations for the appointment of Examiners must be submitted using the form designed for this purpose.

Neither the Internal nor the External Examiner should have had substantial co-authoring or collaborative involvement in the student's work, and neither of the Examiners' own work should be the focus of the student's thesis/portfolio. (*Regulation 16.1i*)

An External Examiner should not have been involved in collaborative research activities with the other Examiner or any member of the supervisory team within the five-year period prior to the *viva voce* examination. (*Regulation 16.1j*)

Neither Examiner should have been the research degree Examiner of any member of the supervisory team, nor have been supervised for a research degree by any member of the supervisory team. (*Regulation 16.1k*)

Examiners will be requested to declare any personal conflict of interest which might preclude their appointment. (*Regulation 16.1l*)

All Examiners' appointments must be approved by the Senate or by the Vice-Chancellor or nominee on behalf of the Senate. (*Regulation 16*)

Examiners must submit individual independent written reports on the student's thesis before the *viva voce* and a joint written report after the *viva voce*.

For all *viva voce*, an

independent, non-examining Chair normally should be appointed from the suitably qualified Academic Staff within the relevant College, except for staff candidates when the Chair should be from a different College. The Chair should not have had a substantial involvement in the candidate's work or have been involved in the appointment of the Examiners but should have experience of research degree assessment. Independent Chair appointments should be in accordance with Section 1 of the *Conduct of the viva voce examination on a research student's thesis/portfolio*. (*Regulation 17b*)

An independent, non-examining Chair should be appointed for all *viva voce*. The Chair should be selected by the College's Associate Dean Research from a pool of suitably qualified Academic Staff who have experience of research degree assessment and are familiar with the regulatory requirements. A member of staff is 'suitably qualified' if they have completed supervisor training within the last three years (Graduate School Management Committee Minute 20/242).

The Chair should be independent in that they should not have had a substantial direct involvement in the candidate's work or have been involved in the appointment of the Examiners (*Regulation 17b*)

The Chair must be impartial and cannot therefore be a member of the student's supervisory team or the Internal Examiner and must be from a different research area. The Chair must not be nominated by the Supervisor or the Internal Examiner. In the case of a staff candidate, the Chair should be from a different College (Regulation 17b).

In some circumstances, for example where both Examiners are external to Aston or the Internal Examiner is inexperienced, an 'experienced' Independent Chair may be required.

An experienced Independent Chair will be a member of Aston Academic Staff who, at the time their appointment is recommended for approval, has:

- chaired an Aston University viva voce examination at the same level (research Masters or doctorate) within the previous five years; and
- been an External Examiner at a viva voce examination for a UK award at the same level (research Masters or doctorate) within the previous ten years.

The University takes a serious view of misconduct in research at any stage in the research degree programme and cases of alleged misconduct, which includes plagiarism and collusion, are dealt with under the [University's Regulations on Student Discipline](#).

11 Complaints and Appeals

The University has approved procedures for dealing with [complaints and appeals](#) and which will be referenced in the Student Handbook. The procedures will also be accessible from a student's MAP homepage. Research students who are recommended for withdrawal from the programme because of, for example, lack of satisfactory progress, including as a result of the examination of the Qualifying Report, will be provided with the opportunity to make representations to the Associate Dean Research and the Director of Research Degree Programmes, or equivalent (Regulation 11). If the outcome of the meeting is unsatisfactory to the student, they may appeal under the provisions of the University's Student Complaints or Academic Appeals Procedures.

Research students who are dissatisfied with their conditions of work or the quality of their supervision should wherever possible discuss the difficulties with their Supervisor. In doing so, it may be appropriate to refer to [this] University Code of Practice for Research Degrees. (*Regulation 28a*)

If a research student prefers not to discuss their concerns with the Supervisor, the student should approach the Associate Dean Research or their nominee or, where the Associate Dean Research is the Supervisor, the Executive Dean. (*Regulation 28b*)

Ultimately, a complaint may be referred under the procedures detailed in the Student Complaints Procedure.

The student may be accompanied or represented at investigative, representation or appeal meetings and will be made aware of the availability of independent advice from the Students' Union Advice and Representation Centre.

In cases where the University's internal complaints or appeals procedures have been exhausted, the student will be provided with the details of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIA). The OIA is an independent scheme for the review of student complaints. The OIA cannot interfere with the operation of a University's academic judgement which is stated as being "not any judgment made by an academic; it is a judgment that is made about a matter where the opinion of an academic expert is essential."⁷.

Graduate School Management Committee will receive the University's annual reports on student appeals and complaints in order to review processes and guidance in place against any recommendations in the report.

Last updated August 2022/SAS/Graduate School/YH

⁷Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education, Glossary