



National Review of Doctoral Qualifications

Addendum to Manual

For the attention of Review Panel Chairs

14 May 2020

Introduction

The process to be followed in the National Review of Doctoral Qualifications is set out in the Manual sent to all parties in 2019.

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated constraints – the lockdown, the rearrangement of interaction between higher education institutions and their staff and students, the need for social distancing, and the current uncertainty about the duration of these constraints – has resulted in the need for modification of some aspects of the review process. This applies particularly to any aspects involving person-to-person physical proximity.

An indefinite postponement of the review process would be counter-productive. Institutions that have submitted their Self-Evaluation Reports (SERs) would prefer to have a reasonable momentum maintained, so that HEQC responses to institutions and the planned national report of Doctoral qualifications can be produced as promptly as circumstances permit.

This addendum outlines proposed modifications to the process. It addresses four steps:

- Standards and National Reviews Directorate screening of SERs;
- Desktop evaluation of the SER by a review panel appointed by the CHE;
- Site visit by review panel;
- Production of review panel report.

Directorate screening of SERs

The screening of SERs is intended to check that all sections of the SER – as outlined in the SER template – have been addressed, and that the information and data submitted fulfil the minimum requirements. The screening does not make any judgement on the quality of the SER content. A screening report is made available to the evaluation panel.

Desktop evaluation of SERs

Desktop evaluation will be conducted online. The evaluation panel will be provided with access, over an agreed period, to the relevant SER and a template for the desktop evaluation report.

Shortly before the panel evaluation commences, the Chair will be given access to the SER, so that s/he can prepare for panel discussion. It will be important for the Chair not to pre-empt, or attempt unilaterally and unduly to override, the collective findings of the panel. This should not, however, compromise the Chair's ultimate responsibility for confirming the content of the evaluation report.

During the desktop evaluation the CHE will, in consultation with the Chair, provide video meeting access for online panel meetings (e.g., via Zoom or Microsoft Teams). This will enable the evaluation panel to interact both in audio-visual and written modes.

Desktop evaluation, in its normal form, is seen as a precursor to a full-scale site visit to the institution. The on-going pandemic restrictions may well result in the need either to curtail severely the duration and scope of a site visit or to cancel *in situ* investigation completely. This would mean that the role of desktop evaluation becomes significantly more important to the review process. For this reason the panel will need to distinguish between a number of methods in which information is obtained and processed. They include the following:

- aspects that have been adequately covered in the SER;
- aspects that require additional information/data from the institution that can be submitted in written form;
- aspects that can be clarified or elaborated on via online audio-visual interviews with the institution (in the event that an *in situ* visit is not feasible, there will be online interviews with institutional management, academic staff, support staff, doctoral students, alumni, etc.);
- aspects that can be clarified or elaborated on via video recording (e.g., filming of specialised facilities and equipment);
- aspects that cannot be adequately addressed without *in situ* inspection.

The last-mentioned method would be the way of last resort. If it is unavoidable, it is possible that a single member of the panel (the Chair or alternative) could make a visit to the institution with a specific agenda limiting person-to-person contact, thus adhering to the principles of social distancing.

The CHE Directorate will, together with panel chairs, ensure that the criteria adopted by panels for the methods of obtaining information/data are applied reasonably and consistently.

The desktop evaluation report

The due date for submission of the SERs was 31st March 2020. The evaluation needs to consider institutional policies, processes, supervision and assessment methods in place up to that date. Since then, the arrival of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown have impelled institutions to introduce and implement new approaches to teaching, supervision and assessment, based largely on online distance methods. The desktop evaluation of the SERs will not take into account any developments introduced subsequent to the deadline of 31st March 2020. If such provision were to be entertained during later stages of the preview process (such as during interviews with institutional staff), that would be at the discretion of the CHE, and additional information would be regarded as supplementary to, rather than integral with, the SER itself.

The desktop evaluation process is primarily analytical, based as it is on yet-to-be-completed information gathering. Its findings remain provisional until all the required information gathering (according to the methods outlined above) has been completed and a final panel report has been compiled. The provisional report may include requests to the institution for additional information on, or clarification of, items that would enable the panel fully to prepare for engagement with the site, whether it be real or virtual.

The CHE will provide desktop evaluators with a report template, which will follow closely the structure of the SER template provided to institutions. It will include identification of aspects that:

- have been adequately addressed in the SER;
- require additional information/data to be provided by the institution prior to further proceedings of the review;
- can be provided to the review panel at the time of *in situ*/online interviews;
- can be addressed, if appropriate, by submission of complementary audio-visual recordings;
- can be addressed only by way of *in situ* inspection by the panel or its representative.

The desktop evaluation report, once signed off by the Chair, is sent to the institution. The institution may respond in order to seek correction of any factual errors or inconsistencies in the report, but not to contest its analysis of information and data.

Prior to commencement of the desktop evaluation, panel members will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement and confirmation of no conflict of interest.

The data costs of related online activity incurred by panel members will be remunerated by the CHE.

Site visit by the review panel

The feasibility of a site visit by the panel is contingent on the duration and scale of lockdown and related constraints. If, within a reasonable time, full site visits become possible, they will nevertheless be conditional on the institution and panel members being mutually comfortable with proposed arrangements, taking safety precautions into account. Furthermore, there would need to be consent among all institutions and all panel members to ensure consistency and equitability in the methods of investigation that are applied. Such universal consent appears, at this stage, unlikely.

If full-scale site visits cannot proceed, then the virtual methods described above will be implemented. In such case, a schedule of online activities will be drafted by the CHE (in consultation with panel members), for endorsement by the institution. It will be most important for the Chair and panel members to be fully prepared for such online interviews

Review panel report

Once all information/data gathering has been completed, the panel will draft its final report. Once the Chair has signed it off and submitted it to the CHE, it will, in the first instance, be considered by the National Standards and Reviews sub-Committee (NSRC) of the HEQC.

The process leading to decision-making by the HEQC is described in Chapter 5 of the Review Manual. The NSRC will either endorse the report or, in cases where there are omissions, inconsistencies or contradictions in the report, refer it back to the review panel for further consideration. The NSRC will also compare all institutional reports to ensure that they are consistent in terms of criteria for evaluation, application of the Doctoral Qualification Standard, recognition in that context of institutional identity, and justification for panel findings based on the information and data provided. When the NSRC is satisfied with the report, in itself and in relation to other reports, it will submit it to the HEQC for its decision.

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