

# National Framework for Doctoral Education



**Revised 2023**

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## Framework Principles

By continuing to implement the National Framework for Doctoral Education, Irish HEIs are committing to embedding the core principles outlined in the NFDE which will in turn continue to enhance doctoral education in Ireland and enable Ireland to position itself as a leader in doctoral provision.

The key principles underpinning the National Framework for Doctoral Education are set out under the following headings:

<b>1. Original contribution to knowledge</b>
<b>2. Institutional responsibility</b>
<b>3. Quality of learning environment</b>
<b>4. Access to research and expertise</b>
<b>5. Learning experience</b>
<b>6. Discipline diversity</b>
<b>7. Delivery of supervision and examination</b>
<b>8. Quality of the final outcome</b>
<b>9. Quality assurance</b>

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## Context

As Ireland continues to establish itself as a knowledge economy and a [leader in Innovation](#), the demand for highly skilled graduates is at an all-time high. In particular, doctoral graduates will be key in Ireland's future efforts to address grand challenges such as climate change, health and wellbeing and digital transformation. Furthermore, '[Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy](#)' emphasises the importance of doctoral students in providing the necessary talent pipeline to drive research excellence and enhance Ireland's international reputation in Research. The continuing evolution of its research landscape, which includes the establishment of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research Innovation and Science and the commencement of the [Higher Education Authority Act 2022](#), makes Ireland an exciting place to undertake research and embark on doctoral education.

A [2021 study](#) performed by EUA Solutions on the level of implementation of the National Framework for Doctoral Education (NFDE) within Irish higher education institutions (HEIs) found that the framework was fully embedded across HEIs, that HEIs have professionalised the delivery of the doctorate and through the framework, Ireland has successfully reformed its doctoral education to be in line with developments in continental Europe and the United Kingdom. These findings reflect the commitment of HEIs to continually improve standards in doctoral education and the importance of the NFDE in providing overarching principles to ensure the quality of the doctorate awarded across all HEIs in Ireland is of the highest standard.

The Irish research landscape has changed significantly since the NFDE was first published in 2015. The minor changes made to this iteration of the NFDE aim to build on the previous publication to ensure that doctoral graduates continue to have the necessary skills to flourish in careers both in and outside of academia. As such, the updates reflect the changes in the landscape and also address gaps in the original framework.

New frameworks and policies introduced since the initial publication of the Framework are also contributing to the student experience and to supports available. Amongst these new frameworks and policies, the institution wide implementation by HEIs of the [National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework and the Healthy Campus Charter and Framework](#) are underpinning structures aimed at improving the quality of mental health supports, wellbeing and suicide prevention initiatives available to all students, including research students and their supervisors.

In addition to the HEA's statutory responsibility to promote the attainment of equality of opportunity in higher education, the HEA's [National Review of Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions \(2016\)](#), the [Report of the Gender Equality Taskforce: Gender Action Plan 2018 –2022](#) and [2<sup>nd</sup> National Review of Gender Equality in Higher Education Institutions \(2022\)](#) have explicit recommendations and actions for HEIs in relation to the advancement of gender equality, including attainment of Athena

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Swan certification and eligibility for research funding. The [Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Higher Education Institutions Implementation Plan](#), and the [Race Equality in the Higher Education Sector Implementation Plan](#) are also being embedded across institutions.

HE Institutions report on the implementation of many of these Frameworks through the HEA System Performance Framework and to the HEA Centre of Excellence for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. This ensures that there is accountability for the doctoral students learning environment and ensures that it adheres to standards set by international best practice.

## **Purpose of the National Framework for Doctoral Education**

The key aim of this National Framework for Doctoral Education is to underpin excellence in all forms of doctoral education in Ireland. It provides a set of principles for doctoral education, while recognising the diversity in the Irish higher education system and the ever-changing research landscape. It is consistent with national, European and international standards, principles and guidelines, including, for example, [Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Providers of Research Degree Programmes](#), the [IUA National Policy Statement on Ensuring Research Integrity in Ireland](#), [the Salzburg principles](#), the [Technological Higher Education Quality Framework - Part III: Internal Quality Assurance and Enhancement of Research](#) developed by THEA, [the Salzburg II recommendations](#) and the [Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training](#). It also takes into account the findings and recommendations arising from the [2021 EUA Solutions study](#) on the level of implementation of Ireland's National Framework for Doctoral Education.

The revised NFDE aligns with national research policies such as the [HEA Principles of Good Practice in Research within Higher Education Institutions \(2022\)](#), [Ireland's Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes \(2020\)](#) and [Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy \(2022\)](#).

The purpose of this Framework is to;

- Facilitate consistent excellence in the quality of postgraduate education and training, including research undertaken at masters and doctoral levels;
- Enable and encourage higher education institutions to work more closely in the delivery of an improved learner-experience and outcome;
- Maximise the employability of doctoral graduates across a broad range of employment sectors by ensuring that the acquisition of discipline-specific knowledge is complemented by the development of transferable skills;
- Underpin the international standing of the Irish doctoral award.

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## Framework Principles

This revised National Framework for Doctoral Education commits the key stakeholders in Irish graduate education and research to the highest standards in the provision of doctoral education and research through the endorsement of the following principles:

- 1. Original contribution to knowledge:** The core of doctoral education is deep engagement with a question, problem, or hypothesis at the frontier of knowledge, and advancement of this frontier under the guidance of expert and committed supervision. To be awarded a doctoral degree, the candidate must have made an original contribution to knowledge.
- 2. Institutional responsibility:** The admission of doctoral students takes into account the preparedness of the applicant, the availability of qualified, competent and accessible supervision, appropriate support services, including wellbeing supports, and the resources necessary to conduct the research.
- 3. Quality of learning environment:** Doctoral education is conducted in a research environment with a high degree of research integrity, academic quality, and infrastructure and where it is consistent with institutional strategies. Academic quality includes quality supervision by expert and committed supervisors and training for supervisors.
- 4. Access to research and expertise:** Doctoral education is conducted in a learning community where sufficient critical mass of internationally recognised research activity exists to allow students to gain access to a training programme of appropriate breadth and to interact with peers engaged in their field, nationally and internationally.
- 5. Learning experience:** Doctoral education significantly increases students' depth and breadth of knowledge of their discipline and develops their expertise in research methodology which is applicable to both a specific project and a wider context. It provides a high-quality research experience and training, including a formalised integrated programme of personal and professional development.
- 6. Discipline diversity:** Recognising that each doctorate is unique, doctoral education is flexible so as to support students of different types, undertaking different modes of study, in a broad range of individual disciplines or within interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary groups.

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**7. Delivery of supervision and examination:** Doctoral education is supported by established structures with:

- supervision by a principal supervisor(s), normally with a supporting panel approved by the institution.
- formal monitoring of progress to completion against published criteria, supported by institutional arrangements.
- clearly defined examination processes, involving external examiners, assessment criteria and declared outcomes, and which allow for the thesis to be presented in different formats.

**8. Quality of the final outcome:** Successful completion and examination of the research thesis, comprising work of publishable quality, is the basis for the award of the doctoral degree.

**9. Quality assurance:** A robust quality assurance system underpins all doctoral provision.

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## Doctoral Outcomes - (Level 10 of Ireland's National Framework of Qualifications)

Doctoral education programmes in Ireland educate and develop researchers to the highest skills levels so that they become creative, critical and independent individuals who will advance the boundaries of research. Through the process of doctoral education, the student is provided with opportunities to develop a range of skills to a very advanced level. These skills relate both to the research process itself and to broader professional training and development. The National Framework for Doctoral Education endorses the following skills and attributes, as articulated in the [IUA Doctoral Skills Statement](#), as key educational objectives for all graduates of Irish doctoral programmes;

- research skills;
- ethics and social understanding skills;
- personal effectiveness transferable skills;
- team-working and leadership skills;
- communication skills;
- entrepreneurship and innovation skills.

The core and essential component of doctoral education remains the advancement of knowledge through original research—a fundamental societal value in itself, based on freedom of enquiry, the fostering of innovative thinking and the development of advanced critical skills.

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## Appendix

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