

# The National Framework for Doctoral Education A Refresh

---

Eithne Guilfoyle  
Professor Emerita  
Dublin City University

July 6, 2023

# Overview

---

- The origin and purpose of the NFDE
- The Nine Principles
- The motivation for doing the 'refresh'
- The process and outcome
- Refreshed Framework

# Original Development of the Framework

---

- Developed in 2015
- Following a lengthy period of consultation with stakeholders
- A Report by EUA Solutions in 2021 indicated that it was still perceived as relevant by Irish HE institutions.

# Purpose of the Framework

---

- Facilitate consistent excellence in the quality of post graduate education and training
- Enable and encourage higher education institutions to work more closely together
- Maximise the employability of doctoral graduates across a broad range of employment
- Underpin the international standing of the Irish doctoral award.

# Nine Overarching Principles

---

1. 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. Successful completion and examination of the research thesis, comprising work of publishable quality, is the basis for the award of the doctoral degree. The thesis can be presented in a variety of formats.
3. Doctoral education increases significantly 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, training (including a formalised integrated programme of personal and professional development) and output consistent with international norms and best practice.
4. 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.

# Nine Overarching Principles

---

5. Recognising that each doctorate is unique, doctoral education is also flexible so as to support students within individual disciplines or within interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary groups.
6. Doctoral education is conducted in a research environment with a high degree of academic quality and infrastructure, and where it is consistent with institutional strategies. Academic quality includes quality supervision and training for supervisors.
7. The admission of doctoral students takes into account preparedness of the applicant, the availability of qualified, competent and accessible supervision and the resources necessary to conduct the research.
8. 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.
9. A robust quality assurance system underpins all doctoral provision.

# Why does the NFDE need an Update?

---

- Developments in Doctoral Education since 2015 – we need to ensure that the Framework is still fully aligned with the latest thinking.
- Editorial issues - wording, redundancy, omissions, ordering of principles etc.
- NFDE is implemented across Higher Education Institutions, but variation in the level of awareness of the NFDE among researchers, supervisors and students. (EUA Solutions report 2021)
- Refresh initiated through the NFDE Advisory Forum, working with the HEA and QQI.

# The Task

---

- No suggestion that the NFDE needs complete rewriting.
- The NFDE is an overarching framework, must be inclusive and respect the variety of doctoral programmes, while still covering the essential elements of a quality doctoral education.
- A balance needs to be struck between the desire to update the framework and the risk of being overly detailed and prescriptive.
- Changes to the NFDE may involve changes to the principles themselves and/or changes to the contextual information provided in the document.



# Approach to the task

---

- Review of relevant reports and literature on Doctoral Education at national and international level
- Consultation with stakeholders
- Distillation of responses and analysis
- Proposed changes presented to the NFDE Advisory Forum
- Some minor revisions adopted
- Final version of the refreshed NFDE approved

# Recent Literature relevant to refresh of NFDE

---

- European Commission. 2011 *Principles for Innovative Doctoral Training*.
- European University Association. 2005. *Salzburg Principles*.
- European University Association. 2010. *Salzburg II Principles*.
- EUA Solutions, 2021. *The National Framework for Doctoral Education in Ireland: Report on its Implementation by Irish Higher Education Institutions*.
- Government of Ireland, 2022. *Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy*.

# Recent Literature relevant to refresh of NFDE

---

- HEA. 2022. *HEA Principles of Good Practice in Research within Higher Education Institutions*
- IUA. 2015. *IUA Postgraduate Skills Statement*.
- IUA. 2019. *National Policy Statement on Ensuring Research Integrity in Ireland*.
- QQI. 2017. *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Research Degrees*.
- QQI. 2020. *Ireland's Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes*

# Consultation with Stakeholders

---

- Irish (HEA designated) HE institutions
- Providers of public research funding including, Science Foundation Ireland, the Irish Research Council, the Health Research Board.
- Irish Business and Employers Confederation
- Union of Students in Ireland
- The Royal Irish Academy

# Consultation with Stakeholders

---

- The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
- The Irish Universities Association
- The Technological Higher Education Association
- The Co-Chairs of The National Review of State Supports for Ph.D. Researchers

# Questions put to Stakeholders

---

- a. Is the NFDE fully aligned with recent thinking in Doctoral Education? Are there elements in the framework that might need adjusting?
- b. Does the NFDE support quality in doctoral education? What might improve this?
- c. Is the NFDE usable in its current form? What might make it more fit for purpose?
- d. Does the wording and ordering of the principles need to be changed?

# Is the NFDE fully aligned with recent thinking in Doctoral Education? Are there elements in the framework that might need adjusting?

---

NFDE still relevant – only minor adjustments if any

Areas of 'concern' include:

- Employability
- Equality diversity and inclusion
- Student wellbeing
- Research integrity
- Funding and Resourcing
- The designation of doctoral students

# Employability

---

- Most doctoral graduates will not work in the academy, but they will enter the wider workforce.
- The important role of broader professional training and development is already referenced in Principles.
- Needs to be further strengthened by discussion in the preamble/context and links to the *IUA Postgraduate Skills Statement* and other similar documents.



# Equality Diversity and Inclusion

---

- EDI very important in all educational contexts, and it is widely embraced by Irish HE institutions
- Not currently referred to directly in the NFDE but at least some aspects can be inferred
- A suggested amendment to one of the principles will strengthen the diversity element
- EDI is directly referred to in the *HEA Principles for Good Practice in Research* and in *Impact 2030*, and direct links to these documents should be provided in the NFDE document.

# Student Wellness

---

- Student wellbeing is a high priority in Irish HE Institutions
- All students can access support services – but these tend to concentrate on the needs of UG students rather than the specific issues faced by doctoral students
- An amendment to one of the principles will strengthen the reference to Student Wellbeing.
- Need to make a commitment to student wellbeing in preamble to the Principles and a link to QQI's *Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes*.

# Research Integrity

---

- Essential to high quality research
- Referenced in all recent policy documents on research
- A minor amendment to one of the Principles will allow us to refer to it directly

# Funding/Resourcing

---

- No consensus that the NFDE should make a more explicit reference to funding.
- Funding is not directly referred to in the NFDE but it does contain the statement ‘the resources necessary to conduct the research’
- Report of the *National Review of State Supports for PhD researchers*, will have implications for this issue.

# The appropriate designation of doctoral students?

---

- Doctoral researchers, doctoral candidates, or doctoral students?
- Continue to use the term doctoral student here for two reasons:
- The term doctoral student aligns with all the most recent Irish policy documents
- The report of the *National Review of State Supports for PhD researchers*, will have implications for this issue.
- if there is a consensus to change the designation it would be a simple matter to alter the wording to reflect that.

# Does the NFDE support quality? What might improve this?

---

- A driver and a supporter of quality in postgraduate education in the sector.
- Valuable in assisting the development of internal policies on graduate education.
- Many involved in graduate education are unaware of its existence.
- Harmonisation and integration of policy documents would be helpful

# Is the NFDE usable in its current form? What might make it more fit for purpose?

---

- Format
- Reaching a wider audience
- Harmonisation and integration of documentation

# Format of the NFDE

---

- Format of the document to be updated for a digital age
- Nine principles should be prominent/ at the top of the document
- Direct links to other relevant documents
- Updated context to take in some of the issues discussed, and to refer to recent national developments
- The 'core value' of each principle should be made explicit.



# Reaching a wider audience

---

- Easily accessible and visible on all websites that deal with graduate education.
- All institutions should have the NFDE on their Graduate School webpages, and on the webpages of Research Centres, where doctoral students are based.
- The NFDE should be referenced in all institutional policies, quality reviews etc. pertaining to doctoral education.

# Reaching a wider audience

---

- The NFDE should be visible at all events that showcase Irish research.
- The NFDE should form part of supervisor training.
- The NFDE should form part of induction/registration of all doctoral students.
- Information on the NFDE should be part of the Institutions 'slide deck' when interacting with new industrial research collaborators, by careers offices when seeking placements for doctoral students, and by the International Offices in promoting graduate education.

# Harmonisation and integration of documentation

---

- A repository of policy documents relevant to graduate education in Ireland should be created and made available on an appropriate website.
- Direct links to relevant documents should appear within the NFDE framework document.
- Any revised versions of existing documents should make reference to the NFDE, as has been done in the case of the QQI and HEA publications referenced above.

# Does the wording of the NFDE need to be changed?

---

- Majority felt that the wording of the principles should be preserved with only minor alterations if any.
- A few minor changes to the wording to improve the 'flow' and to capture some of the concerns raised.

# The Order of the Nine Principles

---

- All principles are equally important.
- The first principle should remain first.
- The ordering of the other principles adjusted to improve the 'flow' eg. Principle 2 refers to examination, while Principle 7 refers to admission.
- Originality requirement first, followed by, admission requirements, characteristics of doctoral education, examination requirements, quality assurance statement.

# Principle 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.

Unchanged

# Principle 2

---

## Institutional Responsibility

The admission of doctoral students takes into account 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.

Comment: increased emphasis on the importance of student wellbeing.

# Principle 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.

Comment: changes emphasise the importance of the supervisor in doctoral education and makes reference to the importance of research integrity.



# Principle 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.

Unchanged.

# Principle 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.

Comment: Minor change of wording, and deletion of final part of the sentence

# Principle 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.

Comment: the modified wording emphasises the diversity of doctoral education in Ireland

# Principle 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.**

Comment: the sentence in **bold** has been moved here from Principle 8.

# Principle 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.

Comment: Final sentence deleted as it is now covered in Principle 7.

# Principle 9

---

## Quality Assurance

A robust quality assurance system underpins all doctoral provision.

Unchanged.

# The Revised 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 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.

# The Revised Principles

---

- 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.



# The Revised Principles

---

**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.

# Conclusion

---

- Ireland is unique in have an agreed set of principles of doctoral education
- They are broad and flexible enough to include the wide variety of different types of doctoral education
- We hope that the refreshed NFDE strikes a balance between updating the NFDE and maintaining the sector's shared core values which have been reflected in the principles.

Go raibh maith agaibh!

---