



Research Degree Policy

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1. Purpose

Atlantic Technological University (ATU or 'we') positions Research & Innovation as a core activity of the University. We therefore recognise that high quality research degrees are both integral to the remit of the University *and* to the pursuit of higher education.

Research in ATU encompasses the range of activities that support original and innovative work in a variety of academic, professional, and technological fields. ATU is committed to maintaining the highest possible standards and integrity in its research activities and to fostering excellence in research practice at all levels across the University.

This policy document articulates the principles and processes that underpin Level 9 and Level 10 awards on the National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ), hereafter described as *Research Degrees*.

The policy provides a framework for ensuring that research conducted by research degree students is of the highest quality and meets the requirements articulated by the wider academic community and relevant professional bodies.

The policy establishes the parameters for awarding of research degrees in ATU, including the planning of research degree projects, supervision, and progression to the attainment of a relevant award. The document comprises:

- the principles that guide and underpin research degrees in ATU
- overview of research degrees
- types of research degree awards
- monitoring and progression
- assessment
- roles and responsibilities relating to the above.¹

¹ As ATU evolves and a new organisational structure is agreed, roles and responsibilities in relation to the management, administration, and quality assurance of Research Degrees are also expected to evolve. Therefore, this policy proposes an indicative set of roles and responsibilities which will be updated as required.

2. Scope

This policy applies to any student who embarks on a programme of study in ATU leading to the award of a research degree at Level 9 and Level 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ).² Research degrees include individual programmes of study undertaken for the award of Master's Degree (Research) and Doctoral Degree (PhD and Professional Doctorate).

The policy also applies to those responsible for the management and assessment of research degrees in ATU, including supervisors and examiners.

The Research Degree Policy should be read in conjunction with related policies and documents within the ATU Academic Quality Assurance and Enhancement Framework (AQAEF): Academic Quality Assurance and Enhancement (AQAE) (sharepoint.com) as well as the *Procedures* and *Forms* which support this policy.³

3. External Reference Documents

The following documents were referenced in the development of this policy and are available on the *Academic Quality Assurance and Enhancement Staff Portal*:

- National Framework for Doctoral Education Revised (2023)
- Department of Education: ESD to 2030: Second National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development (2022)
- Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science: Impact 2030: Ireland's Research and Innovation Strategy (2022)
- Higher Education Authority (HEA) Principles of Good Practice in Research within Irish Higher Education Institutions (2022)
- International Centre for Academic Integrity: Fundamental Values of Academic Integrity (2022) 3rd Edition
- National Open Research Forum: National Action Plan for Open Research (2022)
- EUA Solutions: National Framework for Doctoral Education Implementation Report (2021)
- European Research Area: Policy Agenda 2022- 2024 (2021)
- Ljubljana Declaration on Gender Equality on Research and Innovation (2021)

² This policy does not apply to the Level 9 Cohort-Based Structured Master's Degree Programmes which are covered under the *AQAE004 Programme Design Policy* and *AQAE005 Marks & Standards Policy*.

³ Approved and under development.

- National Academic Integrity Network (NAIN): Academic Integrity: National Principles and Lexicon of Common Terms (2021)
- Research Integrity National Forum: Framework to Enhance Research Integrity in Research Collaborations (2021)
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes (2020)
- Government of Ireland: National Intellectual Property Protocol (2019)
- Research Integrity National Forum: National Policy Statement on Ensuring Research Integrity in Ireland (2019)
- Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) Report of the Expert Panel on the Quality Assurance of Research Degree Programmes in Irish Higher Education Institutions (2019)
- ALLEA: European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2017)
- Quality and Qualifications (QQI) Ireland Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines for Providers of Research Degree Programmes (2017)
- National Framework for Doctoral Education (2015)
- San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) (2012)

4. Policy

4.1 Principles

ATU is committed to supporting a research environment that is underpinned by a culture of integrity and based on good governance, best practice, and support for the development of research.

The quality assurance of research degrees at ATU is underpinned by the nine principles (Figure 1) articulated in the HEA's *'Principles in Research within Irish Higher Education Institutions'* (2022). This set of principles articulate ATU's endorsement of good practice in research conduct.

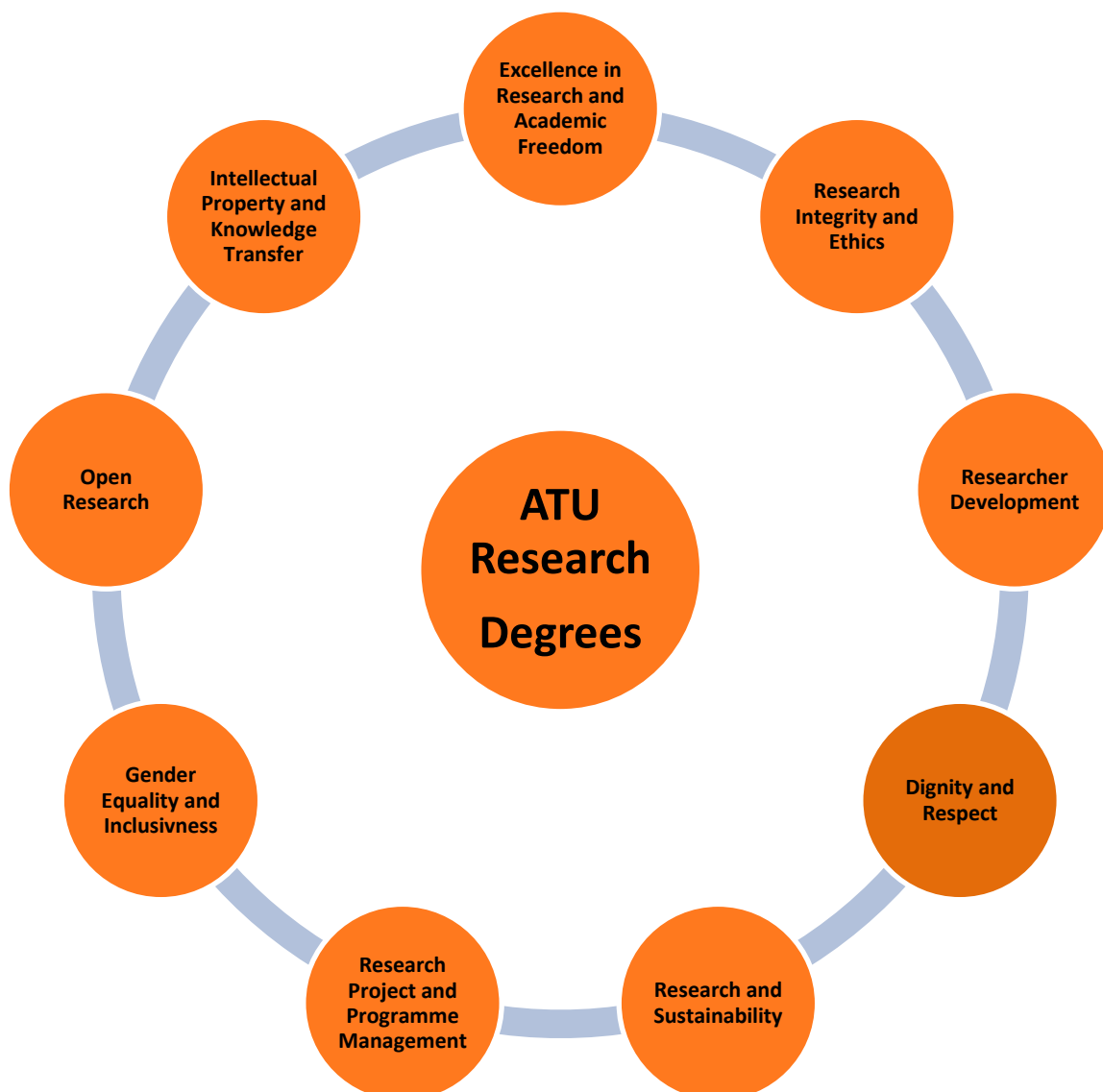


Figure 1: Principles Underpinning Research Degrees (HEA, 2022)

ATU aspires to create a research environment that supports excellent practice. We value academic freedom and recognise that research degree students shall have the freedom, within the law, to challenge received wisdom and to put forward new ideas (HEA, 2022).

In ATU research degrees must:

- Be conducted in an ethical and transparent manner
- Commit to an Open Research Framework that promotes access to research data and research outputs
- Comply with all ATU policies and procedures on the conduct and management of research degrees
- Comply with and operate in accordance with all relevant national legislation.

4.2 Key Terms

Research Degree: A programme of study designed to enable a student to acquire the appropriate knowledge, skills, and competence at Master's Degree level (Level 9, NFQ) or Doctoral Degree level (Level 10, NFQ), principally through autonomous research as the primary/ substantive mode of learning.

Progress Review Panel (PRP): A PRP will be constituted independent of the supervision team to appraise progress identified as unsatisfactory by the supervision team or by the research degree student through the annual monitoring process, or at the request of the supervision team or the research degree student outside of the annual reporting schedule.

Postgraduate Research Advisory Committee (PRAC): The PRAC, a sub-committee of the Research & Innovation Committee, reviews all applications for the admission, confirmation, and transfer processes of research degree programmes. Thereafter, it forwards all reports on same to the Research & Innovation Committee and the Vice President for Academic Affairs & Registrar for review and approval.

Confirmation Assessment: An assessment process undertaken by each PhD student between 15-24 months (full time) or between 30-48 months (part-time) from the date of first registration to confirm satisfactory progress.

4.3 Research Degrees in ATU

ATU research degrees accommodate a range of activities that support innovative research in a variety of academic, professional, and technological fields. Research conducted can be discipline or practice based. Our research degrees build upon existing research programme provision.

ATU will require all research degree students to undertake and complete taught components as part of their research degree programme to embed important skills required in the conduct of research and to develop key transferable skills and knowledge.

ATU regulations regarding submission for a research degree award are detailed in the *AQAE Procedure and Regulations for the Management and Examination of Research Degrees*.⁴

4.3.1 Master's Degree (Research)

The Master's Degree (Research) is a research-based degree at Level 9 on the NFQ (see Appendix 1) that demonstrates a mastery of the principles, theory and practice underlying the chosen subject of enquiry, and a knowledge and appreciation of the relevant literature.

Admission Requirements

The normal entry requirement for a Master Degree (Research) is minimum of a 2.2 honours degree (Level 8) in a relevant discipline.

In the event of an applicant not having a 2.2 honours degree, ATU may consider applications for entry to the Master Degree (Research) in accordance with the *AQAE009 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy*.

Programme Requirements

A Master's Degree (Research) comprises 120 ECTS credits, that typically encompasses self-directed study, supported by a supervision team, and involves the completion of some taught components, with most of the credits awarded for a thesis. The taught elements include 5 ECTS credits of Research Design training and 10 ECTS credits comprised of electives specific to the programme discipline requirements.

A Master's Degree (Research) student may, where applicable, avail of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) of the taught elements of the research degree programme. Please refer to *AQAE009 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy*. Other types of presentation to achieve a Master's Degree (Research) include: Masters by Scholarship.⁵

⁴ Currently under development.

⁵ Please see *AQAE Procedure and Regulations for the Management and Examination of Research Degrees*, currently under development for more detail.

Duration of Study

A Master's Degree (Research) can be undertaken on a full-time basis or a part-time basis and is normally carried out within 2 years full time or 4 years part time. A Master's Degree (Research) student can apply for an extension or deferral to PRAC who will review and forward a recommendation to the Vice President for Academic Affairs & Registrar for approval.

Should the Master's Degree (Research) student not complete the degree within the normal timelines, registration will lapse. If the student wishes subsequently to present for the Master's Degree (Research) degree, they will have to apply to PRAC for re-admission to the Masters Register.

4.3.2 Doctoral Degree

A Doctoral Degree at Level 10 on the NFQ (see Appendix 1) demonstrates outstanding scholarship and ability in a field of study. The National Framework for Doctoral Education (2023) endorses the following skills and attributes as key objectives for graduates of Irish doctoral programmes:

- research skills and awareness
- ethics and social understanding
- communication skills
- personal effectiveness/development
- team-working and leadership
- career management
- entrepreneurship and innovation.

The core of doctoral education is deep engagement with a question, problem, or hypothesis at the frontier of knowledge, and advancement of this frontier. To be awarded a doctoral degree, the student must make an original contribution to knowledge (National Framework of Doctoral Education, 2023) and demonstrate the acquisition of the requisite knowledge, skills and competencies pertaining to Level 10 on the NFQ (Appendix 1).

ATU offers two doctoral degree programmes: Doctor of Philosophy/PhD and Professional Doctorate.

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

A PhD demonstrates original, independent research, where the student acquires both a broad knowledge of a particular field of study, and a comprehensive knowledge of the specialist area upon which their research is focussed. The core objective of a PhD is the advancement of knowledge through original research.

Admission Requirements

The normal academic entry requirements for direct admission to a PhD programme is a minimum of a 2.1 honours degree (Level 8) in the relevant discipline or a Level 9 award in a cognate area from a recognised degree awarding body.

In the event of an applicant not having the above, ATU may consider applications for entry to the PhD programme in accordance with the *AQAE009 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy*.

Programme Requirements

A PhD programme typically involves the completion, submission and assessment of a thesis, a coherent body of original work, which may be accompanied by a portfolio or supporting artefacts.

Every PhD student in ATU will:

1. Embark on an individual programme of research leading to the submission of a doctoral thesis describing a coherent body of original work.
2. Complete 30 ECTS credits of taught modules of advanced education and training during the PhD programme. These include 10 ECTS credits focusing on Research Design and Research Integrity. The remaining 20 ECTS credits are identified in discussion with the supervisors. All taught modules must achieve a Pass grade prior to submission of the PhD for examination.
3. Participate in Annual Progress Reviews.
4. Complete a Confirmation Assessment Process within 15-24 months of date of registration for full time students and 30-48 months of date of registration for part time students.

A PhD student may, by exception, avail of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) of the taught elements of the research degree programme. Please refer to *AQAE009 Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy*.

Successful completion and examination of the research thesis is typically the basis for the award of the PhD degree. Other types of presentation to achieve a PhD include: PhD by Publication, PhD by Scholarship⁶. The award of PhD is examined through an oral examination, the *viva voce*.

Duration of Study

A PhD can be undertaken on a full-time basis or a part-time basis and is normally carried out over four years full time or seven years part time. A PhD student can apply for an extension or deferral to PRAC who will review and forward a recommendation to the Vice President for Academic Affairs & Registrar for approval.

Should the PhD student not complete the degree within the normal timelines, registration will lapse. If the research student wishes subsequently to present for the PhD degree, they will have to apply to PRAC for re-admission to the Doctoral Register.

Professional Doctorate

A professional doctorate is designed to enable committed professionals to study and develop their own practice-based research in a structured and supported environment. It supports original research that will have an impact on professional practice and/or policy and theory. Undertaking a professional doctorate allows the student to situate professional knowledge in a theoretical academic framework.

The Professional Doctorate enables students to gain an in-depth understanding of prevailing practices in the subject area of their field of research; to acquire the necessary expertise in appropriate research design, data collection methods and data analysis techniques; and to conduct, write-up and disseminate high-quality research of a doctoral standard.

Entry Requirements

The normal entry requirements for direct admission to a Professional Doctorate programme are:

- a minimum of five years professional experience or hold a position of responsibility for at least five years related to the chosen area of the Professional Doctorate
and
- hold a minimum of a 2.1 honours degree (Level 8) in a relevant discipline or a Level 9 award in a cognate discipline from a recognised degree awarding body.

⁶ Please see AQAE *Procedure and Regulations for the Management and Examination of Research Degrees*

Programme Requirements

The Professional Doctorate comprises taught elements and an independent piece of research as follows:

1. 60 ECTS credits of taught elements over Years 1 and 2 of the programme
2. Thesis

All 60 ECTS credits must be successfully completed and passed prior to progression to the thesis phase of the Professional Doctorate programme.

Years 1 and 2 of the Professional Doctorate are subject to the following ATU approved policies: *AQAE005 Marks and Standards Policy; AQAE017 Programme and Module Revision Policy.*

Successful completion and examination of the taught elements and the research thesis is the basis for the award of the degree. A Professional Doctorate thesis is examined at an oral examination, a *viva voce*.

Duration of Study

A Professional Doctorate is carried out over a minimum of 4 years.

A Professional Doctorate student who does not complete the requirements for the degree within these timelines must apply to PRAC for re-admission to the Doctoral Register or apply for an extension or deferral to PRAC, who will review and forward a recommendation to the Vice President for Academic Affairs & Registrar for approval.

Professional Doctorate students may exit with a Post Graduate Diploma, subject to it being approved, after completing Years 1 and 2 of the programme and successfully attaining 60 ECTS credits. A candidate having completed the Post Graduate Diploma will be eligible to transfer to a Masters Research (as an exit award) for which they will be required to submit a 30-credit minor thesis.

4.4 Collaborative Provision and Awards

Please see *AQAE ATU Collaborative Provision Policy*⁷ which sets out the quality assurance relating to collaborative research programmes, collaboration with other Universities, visiting research students, joint research degree programmes and the criteria to establish joint research awards.

⁷ Currently under development.

4.5 Award Titles

ATU maintains a Register of Research Award Titles (Table 1):

NFQ LEVEL	APPROVED AWARD TITLE	ABBREVIATED TITLE
Level 9	Master of Arts (Research)	MA
	Master of Business (Research)	MBus
	Master of Engineering (Research)	MEng
	Master of Science (Research)	MSc
	Master of Research	MRes
	Master of Philosophy	MPhil
Level 10	Doctor of Philosophy	PhD
	Doctor of Business Administration	DBA

Table 1: Award Titles: Research Degrees

The ATU Award Standards for Master's Degree (Research) and Doctoral Degrees ensure that all qualifications lead to an award at Level 9 and Level 10 of the NFQ (see Appendix 1).

4.6 Registration

ATU maintains two research degree registers:

1. Register of Students for the Master's Degree (Research); known as the "Master's Register".
2. Register of Students pursuing a Doctoral Degree; known as the "Doctoral Register".

Following an offer of admission to the research programme, candidates wishing to apply for registration should complete the relevant registration form⁸. In submitting a registration form, the candidate is agreeing to abide by all ATU regulations.

All research degree applications are reviewed by PRAC and recommendations for admission are forwarded to the Vice President for Academic Affairs & Registrar for approval.

All registered research degree students must renew their registration annually. Renewal of registration is dependent on the payment of fees and a successful outcome to the Annual Review Process (see section 4.11).⁹

⁸ AQAEXXX Research Degree Registration Form currently under development.

⁹ Please see AQAE Procedure and Regulations for the Management and Examination of Research Degrees for full details on registration.

4.7 The Research Calendar

The Vice President for Research & Innovation, in consultation with the Research & Innovation Committee shall publish a Research Calendar each year relating to the planning for and progress of research students.

4.8 Supervision

Academic supervision is central to the successful completion of a research degree. Supervisors play several key roles including originating and designing the research project, guiding the research degree student in their research work, and maintaining academic standards.

In addition, supervisors help prepare the research degree student for thesis submission and for the final examination (see Appendix 2 for an outline of key responsibilities of research degree students and Appendix 3 for an outline of key responsibilities of supervisors).

4.8.1 Supervision Team

ATU specifies that research degree students shall be allocated a supervision team, with a minimum of two supervisors: a principal supervisor who will have full responsibility for the oversight and management of the research degree student's research; and a co-supervisor who will assist the principal supervisor and, where necessary, provide a complementary skill set to the principal supervisor. The principal supervisor must:

- be a full-time academic member of staff at ATU
- hold a qualification equivalent to, or higher than, the award being sought in the broad discipline area of the proposed research project
- be research active.

The makeup of the supervision team can include academic staff members from ATU and/or external supervisors drawn from but not limited to other Universities, industry, professions, the public sector, and the community/voluntary sector.

The supervision team will support the research degree student through regular scheduled meetings.

A mentoring supervisor can be appointed to the supervision team to support the principal supervisor if the latter has not supervised to completion at the award level being sought. A mentoring supervisor is not involved in the direct supervision of the research degree student and must:

- have the prerequisite experience within the discipline area proposed
- meet all the criteria for the approval of a principal supervisor

- have supervised to completion for a qualification equal to or higher than the award being sought.

4.8.2 Progress Review Panel

A Progress Review Panel (PRP) will be constituted independent of the supervision team to appraise progress identified as unsatisfactory by the supervision team or by the research degree student through the annual progress monitoring process, or at the request of the supervision team or the research degree student outside of the annual reporting schedule.

The Progress Review Panel will comprise:

- Head of School/Faculty in the research degree student's discipline (or nominee)
- Vice President for Academic Affairs & Registrar (or nominee)
- Senior Research Manager with responsibility for postgraduate researcher development (nominated by the Vice President for Research & Innovation)
- Research-active academic staff member (the Chair, or a nominee of the Chair of the Research & Innovation Committee).

Each Progress Review Panel will be constituted to:

- be gender balanced
- mitigate potential conflicts of interest between the Progress Review Panel members, the Student, and the Supervision Team.

The Progress Review Panel will have specific responsibilities to:

- review Annual Progress Reports submitted by the research degree student and the principal supervisor
- discuss the Annual Progress Reports with the research degree student and the supervisors separately
- consider any mitigating circumstances declared by the research degree student
- consider issues of supervisory performance

Following the appraisal, the PRP will recommend one of the following:

1. Continuation on the Master's or Doctoral register/transfer to the Doctoral register (as applicable) as progress is of a sufficiently high standard.
2. Continuation on the Master's or Doctoral register/transfer to the Doctoral register (as applicable) contingent on the implementation of remedial actions proposed by the PRP.
3. Continuation on the Master's register and completion at Masters level as progress is insufficient to warrant transfer to the doctoral register.
4. Discontinuation of the research degree student's registration on either research degree register, as progress is not satisfactory and considered irredeemable.

A research degree student may appeal a decision of the PRP through the formal assessment appeal procedure: *AQAE Procedure for Appealing Assessment Outcomes*.¹⁰

PRP outcomes will be notified to the Research Office and PRAC.

4.8.3 Supervisor Training

Appropriate training for supervisors will be provided by ATU.

4.8.4 Changes to Supervision Arrangements

During the period of research, it may be necessary to change supervision arrangements. In most cases the research degree student and the supervision team will work together to agree a suitable substitution.

New additional supervisor

New additional supervisors may need to be appointed for various reasons, for example, a new supervisor may be required to provide additional expertise. Additions to supervisory arrangements should be agreed between the research degree student and the supervision team and is overseen by the Head of School/Faculty and notified to PRAC.

Replacement on supervision team

A replacement in the supervision team may be necessitated for reasons, which include, but are not limited to, the following:

- a supervisor may no longer be available due to retirement, illness, or death
- there may be a breakdown in the supervision relationship and the research degree student and supervisors may not be able to continue to work together.

An application for replacement supervision is submitted to the Head of School/Faculty. The relevant Head of School/Faculty proposes replacement supervision, and this is forwarded to PRAC for approval.

¹⁰ Currently under development.

4.9 Researcher Development

4.9.1 Induction

During their first year, all research degree students must attend an induction programme which will acquaint the students with the research process and regulations.

The induction programme will typically include:

1. An overview of the Research Degree.
2. Planning the Project.
3. Research Integrity and Research Ethics.
4. Library Services.
5. Student Services.
6. International Student Services.
7. Research Degree Policy and Associated Procedures/Forms.

4.9.2 Research Infrastructure

Each research degree student will be provided with full access to library services and other programme specific equipment as appropriate. In addition, and where resources allow, ATU will endeavour to provide each Doctoral student will be provided with access to a desk and computer.

4.9.3 Research and Professional Development Plan (RPDP)

In the early stages of the programme, the research degree student and their supervisors meet to discuss the research question(s) and proposed research design. Skills and training that the research degree student may require in implementing the proposed research design are agreed. Consideration of the acquisition of skills at appropriate times is advised.

The training schedule should take account of any future professional needs and career plan of the student.

The research team develop the research programme (with reference to funding applications where applicable), through the generation of a Research and Professional Development Plan (RPDP). The *AQAEXXX Research Professional Development Form* should be completed and reviewed as part of the Annual Progress Review process.¹¹

¹¹ Currently under development.

4.9.4 Academic Development

ATU considers that opportunities involving the acquisition of generic and transferable skills are an important element in the formation of a research graduate. These may include teaching support; tutorial provision; fieldwork assistance and/or practical demonstrations.

In consultation with the supervision team and where funding arrangements allow, the norm for engagement in these activities is 2 hours per week, with a maximum of 3 hours per week.

4.9.5 Research Integrity

Research integrity is inherent in research degrees and a shared responsibility. Education and the promotion of good research practice are the foundations of research integrity (National Policy Statement on Ensuring Research Integrity in Ireland, 2019).

ATU upholds the fundamental principles of reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability in the conduct of research degrees. Research degree students and the supervision team must promote and safeguard research integrity and work to combat academic misconduct, academic fraud, and misrepresentation.

4.9.6 Research Ethics

Research ethics involve the application of fundamental ethical principles to research including in the design and implementation of the research study, the use of resources, research outputs, the avoidance of academic misconduct, and the regulation of research.

Each research degree student must apply for and receive formal approval from the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) prior to the commencement of data collection/fieldwork.

The application for ethics approval may involve the submission of a self-declaration form, signed by the research degree student and the principal supervisor or a full ethics approval application depending on the nature, scope, and type of research project.

All details on research ethics are outlined in the *AQAE Research Ethics Policy, and the AQAE Procedure for Applying for Research Ethics*¹².

ATU maintains an Establishment Authorisation granted by HPRA to ensure procedures involving the scientific use of animals follow the provisions of the relevant EU and National Legislation (respectively, Directive 2010/63/EU and SI No 543 of 2012). This authorisation imposes statutory controls on the University, requires designation of defined roles, and restricts the involvement of persons using animals in research to named and trained individuals. Compliance with the law and with the terms of our authorisation stipulates

¹² Currently under development.

ethical review processes that operate separately to ATU's more general research ethics framework.¹³

4.9.7 Data Management

ATU has clear lines of accountability which apply to the management of research degree programmes, including the development of transparent data management plans. Research degree students and supervisors must refer to the *ATU Data Protection Policy* to ensure all data are managed appropriately. Research degree students are required to keep clear and accurate records of the research procedures followed and of the results obtained, including interim results.

4.10 Student Complaints

ATU provides an opportunity for research degree students to report and resolve complaints through the *ATU Student Complaints Policy* and associated *Procedures*.¹⁴ Where possible, complaints should be resolved as near as possible to their source.

¹³ AQAE Animal Research Ethics Policy.

¹⁴ Currently under development.

4.11 Monitoring and Progression

4.11.1 Annual Progress Review

In addition to regular scheduled meetings between the supervision team and the research degree student, all registered research degree students in ATU must undertake an Annual Progress Review to monitor and evaluate progress and to ensure that the research is progressing adequately and meets the standards required. This may also include programme specific requirements for the Master's Degree (Research) and the Professional Doctorate.

The Annual Progress Review process, convened by the Research and Innovation Office, involves the independent submission of annual report forms, *AQAEXXX Annual Progress Review Form*¹⁵ (see Appendix 4) compiled by the research degree student, and separately by the principal supervisor (in consultation with the wider supervision team as required).

Areas addressed in the Annual Progress Review include: agreed research plan and work schedule; level of satisfaction of research degree student and supervisors; frequency of meetings; Research and Professional Development Plan; and proposed date of submission.

Within their Annual Progress Report the principal supervisor will confirm whether they consider the research degree student's progress to be one of the following:

1. Satisfactory, and of a sufficiently high standard to warrant continuation on the Master's or Doctoral register/transfer to the Doctoral register (as applicable).
2. Unsatisfactory, but redeemable through interventions agreed with the supervision team, and therefore warranting continuation on the Master's or Doctoral register/transfer to the Doctoral register (as applicable).
3. Unsatisfactory, and requiring mediation independent of the supervision team.

Within their Annual Progress Report the research degree student will confirm whether they consider their progress to be one of the following:

1. Satisfactory, and sufficiently supported by the supervision team and University to warrant continuation on the Masters or Doctoral register/transfer to the Doctoral register (as applicable).
2. Unsatisfactory, but redeemable through interventions agreed with the supervision team, and therefore warranting continuation on the Master's or Doctoral register/transfer to the Doctoral register (as applicable).
3. Unsatisfactory, and requiring mediation independent of the supervision team.

Selection of option 3 above by either the research degree student or the supervisor will trigger an independent appraisal of progress by a Progress Review Panel.

¹⁵ Currently under development.

Outcomes one and two in the Annual Progress Report will be notified by the Research and Innovation Office to PRAC.

The renewal of registration for a Master's Degree (Research); PhD; and Years 3 and 4 of the Level 10 Professional Doctorate is dependent on a positive outcome to the Annual Progress Review Process.

A research degree student may appeal a decision of the Annual Progress Review through the formal assessment appeal procedure: *AQAE Procedure for Appealing Assessment Outcomes*.¹⁶

4.11.2 Confirmation Assessment

The Confirmation Assessment is a separate and additional process to the annual review process for PhD students to establish that sufficient progress has been made, and that the student has the competence and capacity to complete the proposed research.

The process of confirmation takes place between 18-24 months (full-time register) or between 30-48 months (part-time register) from the date of first registration.

The Confirmation Assessment will be undertaken by a panel comprising two academics, one internal staff member of ATU and one external to ATU. The panel must be independent of the student's project and the supervision team, hold academic qualifications at Level 10 in the relevant discipline and be sufficiently knowledgeable of the field of work. The supervision team can make recommendations on the composition of the panel.

The process involves the PhD student and the principal supervisor completing a *AQAEXXX Confirmation Assessment Report Form*¹⁷ that includes information on agreed mandatory milestones, including any taught components. In addition, the PhD student submits a substantial written report and will meet with the Confirmation Assessment Panel to discuss work completed to date.

The Confirmation Assessment will focus on progress, achievement, development, plans, milestones, and the written submission and will confirm whether the proposed work meets the Doctoral degree award standards or not.

¹⁶ Currently under development.

¹⁷ Currently under development.

The Confirmation Assessment Panel will make one of the following four recommendations:

1. Progress sufficient to continue on the Doctoral register.
2. Progress insufficient. Remedial action required. Return for Confirmation Assessment within six months.
3. Progress unsatisfactory. Research degree student recommended to apply for transfer to the Master's Register.
4. Recommend that the research degree student's registration be terminated.

The panel report their decision to the relevant Head of School/Faculty who notify PRAC of the outcome. PRAC will notify the supervision team and the research degree student of the decision of the Confirmation Assessment Panel.

A PhD student may appeal a decision of the Confirmation Assessment through the formal assessment appeal procedure: *AQAE Procedure for Appealing Assessment Outcomes*.

4.12 Changes in Registration Status

4.12.1 Transfer to the Doctoral Register¹⁸

ATU allows for transfer from the Master's Degree (Research) to the Doctoral Register. The transfer process involves the submission of a detailed transfer proposal by the research degree student using the requisite *AQAEXXX Transfer Proposal Form*. A request for transfer can only be initiated following the successful completion of the Annual Progress Review.

For a full-time student, normally an application for transfer may be made no earlier than 12 months after admission to the Master's Register and not later than 18 months after commencement.

For a part-time student, an application for transfer should normally be made no earlier than 24 months after admission to the Master's Register and not later than 36 months after commencement.

A Transfer Assessment Panel is convened to evaluate the proposal, comprising two academics, one internal staff member of ATU and one external to ATU.¹⁹ The panel must be independent of the student's project and the supervision team, hold academic qualifications at Level 10 in the relevant discipline and be sufficiently knowledgeable of the field of work. The supervision team can make recommendations on the composition of the panel.

The assessment will focus on the quality and standard of the work completed by the candidate to date and of the potential for completion of the work at Doctoral standard.

Once the assessment process is complete, the Head of School/Faculty will notify PRAC who forward the recommendation to the Vice President for Academic Affairs & Registrar for approval.

4.12.2 Transfer to the Master's Register

Candidates on the Doctoral Register who are unable to complete the approved programme, may apply to the Vice President for Academic Affairs & Registrar for permission to transfer to the Master's Register.

An application for transfer can be made at any time during the Doctoral programme. The research degree student in consultation with the supervision team applies using the requisite *AQAEXXX Transfer Proposal Form* to PRAC.

¹⁸ Please see *AQAE Procedure and Regulations for the Management of Research Degree Programmes* for full details on the transfer process.

¹⁹ The Transfer Assessment Panel can comprise the same membership as the Confirmation Assessment Panel.

The application is reviewed by PRAC, and a recommendation forwarded to the Vice President for Academic Affairs & Registrar for approval.

4.12.3 Leave of Absence²⁰

It may be necessary for a research degree student to take a leave of absence. A leave of absence is normally granted for not less than one month and not more than one year.

An application for leave of absence is made using *AQAEXXX Leave of Absence Form*.²¹ Granting of a leave of absence may have significant impact on the research degree programme. These will be assessed on an individual basis. An extended leave of absence may render the research degree programme untenable as advised by the supervision team.

All research degree students will be offered the opportunity to discuss proposed leave of absence with relevant Student Support Services.

Leave of absences will be notified to PRAC.

4.12.4 Change of Mode of Study

A research degree student can apply to alter their registration status from full-time study to part-time study (or vice versa) using *AQAE XXX Change of Mode of Study Form*. The supervision team should be consulted about the implications and feasibility of this course of action prior to submission of an application.

Changes to mode of study will be approved by PRAC.

4.12.5 Withdrawal from Research Degree Programme

At any time during the period of their research, a research degree student may choose to withdraw from their research programme. A student who is considering withdrawing from the programme should communicate with their supervisors and PRAC and may seek the advice of the Head of Faculty before taking this option. Students should complete the relevant form *AQAEXXX Withdrawal from Research Degree Form*.²²

Withdrawal from programmes of study will be notified to PRAC.

²⁰If in receipt of funding, it is important to inform the Funding Agency and Fees/Research Accounts Office as appropriate.

²¹ Currently under development.

²² Please see the *AQAE Procedure and Regulations for the Management and Examination of Research Degrees*.

4.13 Examination Process

All research degrees are examined by viva voce following submission of the thesis (or equivalent).²³ Research degrees are awarded in ATU after a student has successfully completed all elements of the research degree programme on which they are registered.²⁴

4.13.1 Appointment of Examiners

Two examiners will assess the thesis element of the research degree: an external examiner, and an internal examiner.²⁵ Two external examiners may be appointed where appropriate, for example, if the research degree student is a member of staff of ATU.

External Examiner

The external examiner will be a suitably qualified academic and/or professional standing, independent of ATU, the research project, the supervisors, and the research degree student.

The external examiner should normally:

- Be a recognised and qualified expert in the discipline
- Be research active in the field of study
- Have a qualification at least of the level sought by the candidate
- Have experience of successfully supervising research degree students to an award at the level being examined
- Have experience of examining research degree programmes at the level of the award being examined.

Internal Examiner

The internal examiner will be an ATU staff member who is independent of the research project, the supervisors, and the research degree student.

The internal examiner must:

- Have a qualification at least of the level being sought by the candidate
- Have experience of successfully supervising research degree students to an award at the level being examined
- Have experience in examining research degree programmes
- Have knowledge and research ability in the discipline.

²³ The procedures for viva voces for Master's Degree (Research) and Doctoral Degrees differ.

²⁴ Full details on the examination process are contained in the *AQAE Procedure and Regulations for the Management and Examination of Research Degrees* accompanying this policy and currently under development.

²⁵ See Appendix 5 for an outline of Examiner Responsibilities.

All examiners will receive relevant ATU Policies and Procedures and NFQ major award descriptors for conduct of examinations at Level 9 and Level 10 of the NFQ.

4.13.2 Viva Voce

All research degree students must undergo an oral examination known as the *viva voce*. The *viva voce* provides the student with an opportunity to defend their research and allows the examiners to assess whether the student has met the requirements for the research degree to be awarded.

The supervisors may be present at the *viva voce* but will not normally take part unless requested to do so by the Examiners or Chairperson.

An independent Chairperson (Chair) will be appointed for the *viva voce*. Eligible chairpersons must have undertaken appropriate training on chairing research degree examinations and on the relevant ATU Policies and Procedures.

Criteria for appointment of Chair are as follows:

- be a full-time member of staff of ATU
- have completed ATU training on chairing research examinations
- have a qualification of at least the level sought by the candidate and/or have experience of successfully supervising research degree students to an award at this level and/or have experience of examining at this level.

The role of the Chair is to manage the *viva voce* and to ensure that it is undertaken in a rigorous, fair, reliable, courteous, and professional manner, and in accordance with relevant university regulations.²⁶ The Chair can provide advice on these regulations as required. The Chair shall have no role in determining the result.

On occasions, the Research and Innovation Office may request that an observer attend Doctoral *viva voce* to develop experience of examining at Level 10.

²⁶ Please see the *AQAE Procedure and Regulations for the Management and Examination of Research Degrees*.

4.14 Responsibilities

As a Designated Awarding Body, ATU will ensure that the quality assurance of research degrees is maintained to the highest standards and accountability.

As the University evolves and a new organisational structure is agreed, roles and responsibilities in relation to the management, administration, and quality assurance of Research Degrees are also expected to evolve.²⁷

The following sets out the indicative delineation of roles and responsibilities, subject to the new ATU Organisational Structure, ATU Strategic Plan, and the ATU Research & Innovation Strategy.

4.14.1 Academic Council

Academic Council has a statutory responsibility to control the academic affairs of the University, including the curriculum, instruction and education provided by ATU.

4.14.2 Research & Innovation Committee

The Research & Innovation committee is a standing committee of Academic Council. Its specific responsibilities relating to research degrees are to:

- review and recommend policies in relation to the quality assurance of research programmes
- liaise with PRAC on admission/reviews, confirmation, transfer between registers and examination
- review and oversee the implementation of University policy on Research Ethics.

4.14.3 Vice President for Academic Affairs & Registrar

The responsibilities of the Vice President for Academic Affairs & Registrar relating to research degrees include:

- updating policies and procedures for research degrees, as approved by the Academic Council
- maintaining the Master's Degree (Research) and Doctoral Degree registers
- admitting and registering research degree students
- providing approved examiners of research degree programmes with all necessary documentation and contracts
- convening Examination Board meetings and organising the conferring of awards.

²⁷ As roles and responsibilities evolve, this policy will be updated as required.

4.14.4 The Postgraduate Research Advisory Committee

The Postgraduate Research Advisory Committee (PRAC), a sub-committee of the Research & Innovation Committee, reviews all applications for admission, confirmation, and transfer processes of research degree programmes. PRAC forwards formal reports on same in a timely fashion to the Research & Innovation Committee and the Vice President for Academic Affairs & Registrar for review and approval.

All applications for admission, confirmation and transfer to the research degree registers will be evaluated and considered for completeness in the first instance by the Research and Innovation Office. The Research and Innovation Office provide completed applications to PRAC for review.

The specific responsibilities of the PRAC relating to research degrees are:

- to review research degree admission, confirmation, and transfer processes through reviewing all such applications to the Level 9 Master's Degree (Research) and Level 10 Doctoral registers (see Appendix 6 for an outline of indicative Terms of Reference and Composition of PRAC)
- approve applications for extensions and deferrals to submission dates for research degrees
- liaise with all relevant functions including the Research & Innovation Committee, the Research Office, and the Vice President for Academic Affairs and Registrar.

4.14.5 Vice President for Research & Innovation

The specific responsibilities of the Vice President for Research & Innovation relating to research degrees include:

- publishing the Research Calendar
- co-ordinating the University Research Ethics Committee
- implementing and managing research degree policies and associated procedures.

4.14.6 Research and Innovation Office

The roles and responsibilities of the Research and Innovation Office in relation to research degrees will be determined in the context of the agreed ATU organisational structure.

Indicative responsibilities may include:

- to review all applications and liaise with PRAC to co-ordinate the preparation of admission, confirmation assessment and transfer proposals
- coordinate with Faculties the induction process for research degree students
- organise and promote programmes of generic and transferable skills training for research degree students

- coordinate training programmes for new and existing supervisors covering procedures, regulations, and practical management, including issues relating to research student supervision
- manage the implementation of quality assurance and enhancement policies, as approved by Academic Council
- develop and maintain key research measures of performance for management reporting.

4.14.7 Head of School/Faculty

The roles and responsibilities of the Head of School/Faculty in relation to research degrees will be determined in the context the agreed ATU organisational structure. Indicative responsibilities may include:

- confirming that student registration has been assessed by PRAC
- ensuring the research degree student has the appropriate resources to complete their research degree programme
- confirm that provision can be made for adequate supervision and training, facilities and resources including equipment, and consumables required for the proposed research degree programme
- notify PRAC of outcomes of annual progress reviews and confirmation assessments.

5. Associated Documents Generated by this Policy

- *AQAE Procedure and Regulations for the Management and Examination of Research Degree*
- *AQAE Procedure for Appealing Assessment Outcomes*
- *AQAE Forms:*
 - *AQAEXXX Research Degree Registration Form*
 - *AQAEXXX Research Professional Development Plan Form*
 - *AQAEXXX Research Ethics Form*
 - *AQAEXXX Annual Progress Report Form*
 - *AQAEXXX Confirmation Assessment Form*
 - *AQAEXXX Transfer Proposal Form*
 - *AQAEXXX Leave of Absence Form*
 - *AQAEXXX Change of Mode of Study Form*
 - *AQAEXXX Withdrawal from Research Degree Programme Form*
 - *AQAE014_004 External Examiner Report Research Degree Form*

6. Revision History

Revision No	Description of Change	Approval Date
000	New Policy, Approved by academic council	27 th October 2023

7. Appendices

Appendix 1

NFQ Award Descriptors Level 9 and Level 10

The following award descriptors apply to Level 9 (Table 1) and Level 10 (Table 2) research degrees (QQI, 2014). Additional standards and learning outcomes may be published by ATU from time to time. The learning outcomes for each NFQ level relate to the application of knowledge, understanding and problem-solving abilities related to a field of study.

Table 1: Master's Degree (Research) Award Descriptor

Knowledge - breadth	A systematic understanding of knowledge, at, or informed by, the forefront of a field of learning
Knowledge - kind	A critical awareness of current problems and/or new insights, generally informed by the forefront of a field of learning
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate a range of standard and specialized research or equivalent tools and techniques of enquiry
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Select from complex and skills across a field of learning; develop new skills to a high level, including novel and emerging techniques
Competence - context	Act in a wide and often unpredictable variety of professional levels and ill-defined contexts
Competence - role	Take significant responsibility for the work of individuals and groups; lead and initiate activity
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to self-evaluate and take responsibility for continuing academic/ professional development
Competence - insight	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and act to change them
Progression Transfer	Progression to programmes leading to Doctoral Degree, or to another Master's Degree or to a Postgraduate Diploma

Table 2: Doctoral Degree Award Descriptors

Knowledge - breadth	A systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of a field of learning
Knowledge - kind	The creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research, or other scholarship, of a quality to satisfy review by peers
Know-how and skill - range	Demonstrate a significant range of the principal skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials which are associated with a field of learning; develop new skills, techniques, tools, practices and/or materials
Know-how and skill - selectivity	Respond to abstract problems that expand and redefine existing procedural knowledge
Competence - context	Exercise personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional or equivalent contexts
Competence - role	Communicate results of research and innovation to peers; engage in critical dialogue; lead and originate complex social processes.
Competence – learning to learn	Learn to critique the broader implications of applying knowledge to particular contexts
Competence - insight	Scrutinise and reflect on social norms and relationships and lead action to change them

Appendix 2

Research Degree Student Responsibilities

The research student shall:

- Adhere to all ATU regulations governing research degrees
- Agree in advance the programme of work, and the aims, objectives, and timeframe for the proposed programme, including the nature and extent of the guidance expected, with the supervision team
- Be responsible for carrying out the work, in a timely fashion, to the required standard
- Agree a schedule of meetings with the supervision team and arrangements for the evaluation of progress
- Inform the supervision team as early as possible, of any significant problems and difficulties encountered
- Complete the relevant forms to obtain approval for
 - Leave of absence
 - Change of supervisors
 - Change mode of study
 - Withdrawal from studies
- Provide a comprehensive annual progress report by the date set each academic year and complete relevant form
- Make an oral presentation on annual progress where required
- Contribute, as appropriate, to reports for funding agencies or other stakeholders
- Submit a thesis in accordance with the schedule of exams of ATU
- Be responsible for ensuring that the thesis presentation format is in accordance with ATU regulations
- Not initiate any formal contact with the examiners.

Appendix 3

Supervisor Responsibilities

Supervisors shall:

- Be cognisant of the National Framework for Doctoral Education (2023) and the Framework of Good Research Practice for Research Degree Programmes (QQI, 2020)
- Mentor and guide the research degree student
- Provide advice in relation to:
 - the nature of the work to be undertaken and the standard expected
 - the planning of the research
 - the appropriate literature and sources
 - attendance at appropriate taught courses in research methodology and requisite techniques to ensure student has the necessary skills for sustained independent effort
 - attendance at appropriate research seminars and/or conferences
 - publication in appropriate journals
- Agree a programme of work
- Agree a schedule of meetings
- Maintain contact with the research degree student through scheduled meetings
- Monitor the progress of the research degree student's work on a formal basis by setting appropriate academic standards and milestones, and by assessing and providing constructive criticism in reasonable time
- Participate in the annual progress review which formally reviews the annual report, attend the student's oral presentation, and make an assessment report on the research degree and its progress
- Identify, at as early a stage as possible, insufficient progress, to allow adequate time for re-orientation and correction
- Complete the relevant forms if a student is moving to a different research programme
- Support the notice of intention to submit a thesis for examination
- Make such reports as are required to funding agencies, or other stakeholders
- Make suggestions on Internal and External Examiners
- Not initiate any formal contact with the examiners.

Appendix 4

Annual Progress Report

The Annual Student Progress Report Form includes the following details:

- Agreed research plan with supervisors
- Structured work schedule and compliance with schedule
- Level of satisfaction with supervision and general progress to date
- Frequency of meetings with supervisors
- Target date for submission of thesis
- Training in research skills and techniques required by the student
- Summary of feedback received from the student to date
- Any serious problems encountered with the research to date
- Supervisor satisfaction with the general progress of the work to date

Appendix 5

Responsibilities of Examiners

The responsibilities of the Internal and External examiners for Research Degrees are:

- To complete an examination of the submitted work
- To prepare independent preliminary observations on the submitted work
- To return the copy of the submitted work and a report using the relevant form recording assessment and observations
- To attend the *viva voce* examination
- To communicate with other examiners after one month of receipt of the student's thesis
- To conclude the assessment, including *viva voce*, normally within 3 months of receipt of the student's thesis
- To assist the University in any matters relating to an examination appeal requested by the research degree student
- Not to engage in direct communication or correspondence with the research degree student or the supervision team in advance of the *viva voce*
- To ensure the confidentiality of communication, examination and documentation pertaining to research degrees in ATU.

Appendix 6

Terms of Reference and Composition of Postgraduate Research Advisory Committee (Indicative)

The indicative terms of reference of PRAC are to:

- review all new applications for registration to research degree programmes
- review all confirmation assessments
- review all applications for transfer between research degree registers
- produce formal reports on the above
- liaise with relevant key functions, including the Research & Innovation Committee.

PRAC will normally serve for three years (aligned with the term of Academic Council). PRAC will normally meet in mid-October and mid-January and may convene as required outside of these times.

The Research & Innovation Committee will nominate membership of PRAC to the Academic Council for approval.

The proposed role composition of PRAC cognisant of gender, discipline and Faculty representation is:

- 1 Senior Research Manager
- 1 Assistant Registrar
- 1 Academic Affairs Manager (responsible for Admissions)
- 4 Members of Research & Innovation Committee
- Chair or nominee of the Research & Innovation Committee of Academic Council
- 4 Research Degree Supervisors
- Secretary.

Co-option of membership of PRAC will be enabled where appropriate.

A quorum will comprise of half of the membership plus one.