Guide to Good Practice in the Recruitment and Selection of Research Students

Foreword

It is hoped the *'Guide to Good Practice in the Recruitment and Selection of Research Students'* will serve as a useful tool for supervisors (both experienced and new), Heads of School and research staff and will benefit postgraduate research applicants to DCU. It draws heavily from publications in the area, including '*Ireland's Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes' (QQI, 2020), 'Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines Developed by QQI for Providers of Research Degree Programmes' (QQI, 2017)* and '*Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area' (EUA, 2015).*

Research student numbers in Ireland grew substantially though the 2000s, and DCU now registers between 160 and 200 new research students each year. The intention of these guidelines is that each School / Research Group integrates principles of good practice in discipline- or area-specific processes of student recruitment.

Irrespective of funding source, students undertaking a research award make a substantial commitment and take a certain personal and financial risk. In order that the chances of successful completion are as high as possible, it is key that incoming students are as well informed as possible. They should understand the likely workload and extent of the time commitment, be clear on who will be involved in their supervision, and have some insight into their background and style of working with research students, have reasonable expectations as to the facilities afforded them, and the costs they are likely to incur as well as what is expected of them as a doctoral student.

The University also takes on substantial responsibilities and some risk when recruiting a research student, whether they are self-supporting or funded. Although rare, poor recruitment decisions can be very costly in terms of time expended at supervisor, School and University levels in attempting to devise or enforce an exit plan. While the university sets down minimum requirements for discipline and language background, attaining these alone is no guarantee a candidate will successfully complete, and there is an onus on supervisors and Schools to also satisfy themselves as to the extent to which the applicant is informed about what they have applied to take on, their suitability to research work, commitment, motivation, and funding context.

Guide Structure

Each key area is presented in the form of non-prescriptive statement that reflects a 'good practice'. The scope of this guide and the examples provided are neither exhaustive nor definitive. Some of the measures are appropriately dealt with at University level. Of those delivered at School and Research Centre level, it is recognised that good practice can be achieved in a number of ways and diversity in this respect may exist. However, the overarching principles and key points in these guidelines, intend to have general application across a number of disciplinary fields and areas.

Good Practice Principles of Recruitment

1. Comprehensive information is available to applicants
2. An open recruitment approach is adopted
3. Clear minimum requirements are set
4. Transparent, relevant and clear criteria for and conditions of selection are used
5. Adequate time is allowed for decision making
6. Applications are thoroughly evaluated
7. Reviewers are context sensitive in evaluating applications
8. Supervisor(s), resources and space are in place before an offer is made
9. Feedback is provided to unsuccessful applicants
10. Relevant documentation is provided before a student registers

1. Comprehensive information is available to applicants

Information on what it means to undertake a research degree is available to prospective students, with the broader challenges, completion times, and wide range of possible career paths communicated in concise, clear and easily understood forms (incl. website posts to facilitate access for international students). Information on minimum entry requirements[1], application processes, and selection criteria is available.

Research profiles are available on Schools / Centre websites. These include: composition of research groups, broader expertise and research focus, up-to-date information on relevant academic staff, staff supervision experience and their publication record.

Prospective research students have access to academic staff in the Schools / Units to discuss ideas and research proposals prior to application for entry to a research programme.

Informal visits, meeting and interviews for prospective students with suitable supervisors are facilitated for qualifying candidates, so that they can gain an understanding of the proposed project, University facilities and supervisor style. Where applicable, candidates are offered a tour of the academic unit and an opportunity to meet a range of research students and academic staff for informal discussions or a formal interview.

Information on the following is readily available:

- o Expectations regarding students' teaching and learning support duties.
- o Expectations regarding publication of research.
- o Performance monitoring and examination procedures.
- o Post-entry supports and services available from careers and other student services.

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[1] Guidance on equivalence for particular countries is available on DCU Registry website.

- o Research facilities on campus, including, as relevant, desk space, computer equipment, access to labs and other resources.
- o Entitlement to grants and expenses.
- o Opportunities for training.
- o Visa requirements, and responsibility for visa issues.
- o Potential candidates should be informed about the cost of living in Dublin/Ireland and the challenges in finding student accommodation.

2. An open recruitment approach is adopted

All applications for research degrees are treated in accordance with the University quality and diversity policies. 'Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy for Research Degrees' is available on the DCU website.

All funded studentships are openly advertised.

- o Advertisements[2] give a broad description of the knowledge and competencies required.
- o The recruitment process and selection criteria are published.
- o Prospective students are advised on the number of available positions and the career prospects and diverse career paths open to graduates.

3. Clear minimum requirements are set

Minimum entry requirements regarding an applicant's disciplinary academic background for specific research award registers are laid down in the academic regulations.

Minimum English language requirements are published.

4. Transparent, relevant and clear criteria for, and conditions of selection are used

The criteria for shortlisting and selecting research students and projects in the Research Centre / Schools are made available, and are fair and explicit.

Selection takes into account:

- o An applicant's academic merit, overall potential as researchers (taking into account research / work-related experience), motivation and likelihood to deliver on the level of commitment required, ability to work in the specific research setting.
- o The availability of suitable supervisor(s).
- o The availability of other resources (archives, data, access to specific groups,

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[2] The Graduate Studies Office is notified of specific opportunities, so that enquiries can be efficiently answered or re-directed as appropriate.

analytical equipment etc.) required for the proposed project.
- o The quality of the research proposal and its fit with the School's research priorities (where relevant) and the Faculty Research Strategy.

Where relevant, guidelines are provided on writing a research proposal, and the type of support which can be expected in preparing same.

Conditions of selection such as acceptance within a certain timeframe, meeting specific academic or language competency requirements within a particular timeframe, dependence on final confirmation of funding, ability to take up the position in Ireland within a specified period of time, etc., are clearly outlined at the time of offer.

5. Adequate time is allowed for decision making

Research opportunities are made known in time to allow for a potentially long recruitment cycle.

General regulations and procedures are implemented well in advance of students arriving on campus and formally starting their postgraduate research work.

6. Applications are thoroughly evaluated

A rigorous process of evaluating discipline specific qualifications and evidence of language competency is in place.

To mitigate against the misuse of Generative AI in applications, interview questions should be specific and targeted at existing knowledge of the topic, knowledge of DCU and the School/Faculty for which the applicant seeks an offer, motivation for seeking to work with a particular supervisor or supervisor(s), etc.

References most relevant to admission to a research award are sought and checked.

Whenever possible, face-to-face interviews are conducted, but at the very least online interviews take place.

Self-funded and scholarship funded applicants undergo as rigorous an evaluation process as all others.

Cognisance is taken of the fact that, in making a selection decision, a supervisor and School act on behalf of university[3].

Formal interview panels with applicants are comprised of experienced staff and not only of prospective supervisors. Members of a selection panel are adequately trained[4].

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[3] The commitment will be over a long term, with an expectation of a successful outcome. The University will be undertaking to provide adequate supervision, a responsibility not nullified by unavailability or unwillingness of a supervisor to continue.

7. Reviewers are context sensitive in evaluating applications

Research students are dealt with individually, as each particular supervisor(s)/ project and applicant history combination is unique.

Schools and units facilitate access for disadvantaged groups.

Access by researchers returning to a research career at later stages of career paths is facilitated.[4]

Prospective supervisors take into consideration the whole range of relevant experience of a candidate.

Career breaks or variations in the chronological order of CVs are not penalised, as researchers' careers become increasingly diverse.

8. Supervisor(s) and resources are in place before an offer is made

A formal application is not approved unless supported by at least one, qualified principal supervisor.

An application is not approved until the Head of School is satisfied that necessary resources are in place, and responsibility for the fee liability over the expected period of registration is clear.

Systems are in place to capture this information at time of approval.

9. Feedback is provided to unsuccessful applicants

In the context of a specific advertised studentship or formal review process to which submissions were invited:

- o Applicants receive a timely response indicating the status of their application.

- o Applicants not shortlisted or chosen for full review are given a brief statement of why this was the outcome.

- o Post interview or post full review, unsuccessful candidates are given, on request, feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of their application so they can gain an understanding of what they can improve. Unsuccessful candidates can appeal an application decision in accordance with DCU's 'Admissions Appeals Policy'.

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[4] DCU Human Resources guidelines on good practice in interviews:
http://www4.dcu.ie/info/policies/interview.shtml

10. Relevant information is provided before a student registers

Selected students are advised on how to finalise the application process and register with the University.

Students have access to practical information relevant to their situation regarding visas, health insurance, accommodation, cost of living, etc.

Where relevant, students are provided with a *Terms and Conditions* letter regarding their funding[5].

Students are made aware of all relevant University policies including regulations governing graduate research degrees ('Code of Good Research Practice') and research ethics guidelines ('Code of Practice on Authorship' and 'Academic Integrity and Plagiarism Policy'). Students registered for graduate research degree programmes must also adhere to the 'National Policy Statement on Ensuring Research Integrity in Ireland', adopted by the Irish Universities Association and aligned with the 'European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity'. Students must also adhere to 'DCU Student Charter', academic regulations regarding progress monitoring and deferral, code of discipline etc. and School/Faculty policies on learning support duties, health and safety statements, and others as appropriate.

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[5] This may be from DCU or an external agency.

Bibliography

These guidelines draw from the following publications:

o European Commission (2005) *The European Charter for Researchers: The Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers.* Luxembourg: Office of the Official Publications of the European Communities.

o European Science Foundation (2012) *Developing Research Careers In and Beyond Europe: Enabling – Observing – Guiding and Going Global,* A Report by the ESF Member Organisation Forum 'European Alliance on research Career Development' (EARCD).

o European Universities Association (EUA) (2019) *Doctoral Education in Europe Today: Approaches and Institutional Structures.* www.eua.be.

o Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB) (2009) *Good Practice in the organisation of PhD programmes in Irish Higher Education.* www.iuqb.ie.

o Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2020) *Ireland's Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes*.

o Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) (2017) *Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines developed by QQI for Providers of Research Degree Programmes*.

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