

**POSTGRADUATE AUDITS: Postgraduate Programmes by Research**

Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF)

Standards: Master's and Doctoral Degree by Research

Area 1 - 1.2 Learning Outcomes

Area 3 - 3.1 Assessment and Learning & 3.2 Assessment Method

Area 5 - 5.1 Recruitment and Management

Area 6 - Research Culture

Area 8 - Programme Leadership

**INTRODUCTION**

This advisory is issued pursuant to MQF and Standards for Master's and Doctoral Degree by Research. This advisory contains observations about accreditation audits of post-graduate programmes by research (R). It is issued in the spirit of continuous improvement to raise the standard of our assessment and reports of postgraduate programmes. The following observations were culled from the accreditation reports submitted to the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (MQA) by panels and further discussion in the Accreditation Committee. It is hoped that the issues raised herein will improve and make the process much more robust in support of high quality education that is embodied in the Higher Education Blueprint and which MQA aspires to support.

**ISSUES**

**1) Programme Outcomes Receiving Inadequate Attention**

We still come across, though not always, programme learning outcomes (PLO) inconsistent with the Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF) or nature of the programme (1.2.1). For example, masters programmes requiring contribution to new knowledge or mixed mode programmes where the thesis as partial requirement has not been adequately described, defined and articulated in writing or PLOs of primarily coursework-based professional doctorates mainly addressing research outcomes. Unfortunately, many panels have glossed over this vital foundation of this type of programmes.

**2) Robustness of the Process and Procedures**

Research-based programmes are managed by a common set of processes which informs the postgraduate standards issued by MQA in 2013 (Standards for Master's and Doctoral Degree by Research). Any audit must examine the processes, the documentation, the clarification of the processes and procedures to all involved especially, supervisors, coordinators, staff and students.

In many of the cases reviewed, the panel merely reported on the existence of such processes but did not state if they have seen evidence that the processes and procedures were properly instituted and diligently followed. There must be deep interest in, and respect for the processes amongst all parties to the post-graduate processes.

It has also come to MQA's attention that in many cases, HEPs have resorted to simplistic rubric-based assessment of thesis (3.2.1). While this type of assessment may be useful in providing an overall judgement, they are unable to provide specific commentary of the thesis. Without further clarification of the broad judgements of the thesis, the external and internal review process is necessarily suboptimal. We expect panels to question the assessment methods adopted if its efficacy is in doubt, but in most cases, it is glossed over. Compounding this problem further is the lack of good record of the viva voce proceedings. The net effect of the simplistic assessment forms and poor viva voce records is that candidates do not have clear basis to undertake the corrections and changes. Importantly too, panels have limited evidence to examine the thoroughness of the assessment of the thesis.

### **3) Quality of Thesis**

In the final analysis, the thesis is the most important evidence of the quality of the programme, i.e., achievement of the programme outcomes. Despite serious issues about the quality of the thesis, the panel did not note it in their report for MQA's deliberation. There are important observations about the problem, adequacy of research questions, literature review, analysis and discussion. Yet the final judgement is almost always recommendation for accreditation. Panels cannot make important and adverse observations of the programme but still resolve to conditionally support accreditation.

We have encountered instances when the panel verbally admits that the theses are not up to the standard expected (1.2.1) but their conclusions in the report did not explicitly make this point. Their view is expressed via coded comments like "theses should be improved". We surmise that the stature of the supervisor or the external examiners may be a reason why some panels do not or dare not question the thesis which they have reservations about. The stature and experience of the supervisor does not matter if the outcome, i.e., the thesis supervised is weak in important aspects.

Our view is that if the thesis is found wanting, the panel must raise and record their judgments for MQA to attention. Where necessary, extracts of the theses should be attached to the report as further evidence of the weaknesses.

### **4) Selection of External Examiners**

It is no secret that external examiners are nominated by the supervisors to be formalised by the Coordinator or the Faculty or Senate as the case may be. The extent of scrutiny and predetermination of the criteria for selection of external must be insisted upon and scrupulously checked. In many less established HEPs, the conflict of interest policy is not adequately detailed or adhered to. The policy and the actual adherence should be examined and commented upon. In many cases, this aspect has not been adequately audited.

Often HEPs have a very liberal interpretation of the cognate fields in the selection of internal and external examiners of thesis which is not challenged by panel. Some internal and external examiners have little research experience to evaluate a serious research work, i.e., thesis. Associated with this is the lack of fit between the methodology of the study and the examiner's research competence. We have come across theses which still have a litany of errors despite the viva and the correction processes. No clear and firm comments were made by the examiners of the theses and also by the panels.

#### **5) Appointment of Supervisors**

The standard is clear that supervisor or the principal supervisor must be full-time staff of the HEP. This includes staff with contracts for one year or more. Supervisors must also have at least two years of teaching experience or as co-supervisor (5.1.1). Supervisors must also be in the same or similar area or field as the candidate. The similar field interpretation is being boldly and conveniently stretched by many providers without panel making any comment.

Qualifications of the full-time and part-time supervisors must also be checked. If qualifications are obtained from dubious institutions, HEP's selection policies and procedures must be inquired into and judgements accordingly made (5.1.1). The possession of teaching permit is by itself not an authentication of the qualifications.

#### **6) Head of the Programme**

The head of the programme must be one who is the programme leader (8.2.1). This person must understand the design and outcomes of the programme. Rapid turnover and focus on administrative function robs the programme of a leader who can and must ensure the outcomes and design parameters are understood by all involved in the delivery. In the course of accreditation visit, many panels do not delve deeper into the knowledge, responsibility and authority of the head of programme to communicate with and organise the many individuals involved in the realisation of the outcomes and their continued improvement. The coordinator is not merely a requirement but a critical linchpin to the integrity and quality of the programme.

#### **7) Research Culture and Environment**

Research programmes need a fertile research ecosystem to remain viable. Another area where there is notable silence in accreditation reports is on the presence of an active research culture (Area 6). The research culture is manifested through the recruitment of research active staff, active commitment to and measurement of research productivity, financial support for research by staff and students, support for conferences and colloquia, research collaboration with other institutions and educational resources for research, i.e., library and laboratory services and specialised software.

## **8) Conduct of Viva-Voce and Thesis Correction Processes**

The viva voce is required for doctoral degrees and optional for master's programmes (3.1.1). In many newer HEPS, the processes and procedures are not fully and comprehensively established. A complete handbook or guide or rules pertaining to all aspects of the structures, processes and procedures must be ready before the commencement of a programme. The examination committee, the quorum, the role and powers of the chairperson, the records of viva voce, decision making, decision, correction instructions, verification of corrections and appeal (if any) are not clearly stated, documented and communicated to all involved. Where the standard requires a process, it's the panel responsibility to check on the existence, adequacy, application and effectiveness. In two recent audits visits, Accreditation Committee Members and the Deputy CEO of MQA joined the panel to look at the progress on the conditions imposed for provisional and full accreditation. It became apparent that the panel may not have examined all documents or examined all documents as thoroughly. We were looking at new issues which should have been identified in the initial accreditation audit.

The panel must interrogate these processes and express judgements about the robustness of the processes. We think the reports do not inform us of strength of the processes necessary to arrive at clear and actionable conclusions.

## **9) Consistency of Conclusions**

We observe that despite numerous and often-times, serious comments about the quality and quality assurance of the programme under review, the panel always support accreditation with conditions. MQA is more inclined now to have the HEP fulfill most, if not all, conditions before accreditation. This stance is the result of poor commitment by HEPs in fulfilling conditions attached to accreditation. We expect the panel to think alike in recommending accreditation. MQA may, based on the HEP's track record with the agency, i.e., risk-based assessment, permit conditional accreditations.

## **RESPONSIBILITY OF HEP**

The above stated issues are intended as feedback for expert panels involved in the audit of post graduate programmes by research. HEPs are advised to look into the highlighted issues and suggest improvements to better address the current situation of postgraduate programmes and qualifications.

## **IMPACT ON QUALITY ASSURANCE**

The advisory aims to raise the level of awareness of the issues and enable future audits to be more insightful in assisting MQA to make accreditation decisions. Proper management of postgraduate audits will lead to better control of quality in the offering of postgraduate programmes.