

POSTGRADUATE PROGRAMMES BY THESIS

Malaysian Qualifications Framework (MQF)

- Level 7 & Level 8

Code of Practice for Programme Accreditation (COPPA) 2nd Edition 2017

- Area 6: Programme Management

Standards: Masters and Doctoral Degree

INTRODUCTION

The postgraduate (PG) standard, ‘Standards: Masters and Doctoral Degree’ issued in 2013 and updated in 2015 for thesis-based programmes stipulates the minimum standard that must be observed for the accreditation of a PG programme.

ISSUE

The application by Higher Education Providers (HEPs) must provide evidence of regulations or handbook which must encompass all processes from admission to graduation. However, more often than not, HEPs still do not provide or have these documents or it is not comprehensive. It becomes more concerning when HEPs which already offer other thesis-based programmes are found lacking in these documents. MQA has rejected Provisional Accreditation because such documents were not provided or the HEPs were not responsive to the request within the time given. At Full Accreditation and also at Maintenance Audit, we continue to see that the basis for management of these programmes – regulations on PG is still not complete or not well implemented. Many HEPs, due to rapid turnover of staff, are unable to appreciate the importance of establishing a good quality management system which complies with all PG requirements.

SOLUTION

As an effort to help HEPs to understand the elements of the PG standard and also to institute a good quality management system (programme management), this advisory is issued clarifying the elements of an effective PG management system.

ELABORATION

1. Understanding programme outcomes, requirements and expectations.

All too often, supervisors are assumed to understand masters or doctoral requirements. Through experience and association everyone is deemed to have a common and presumably, a clear idea of what constitutes a masters or doctoral qualification. Increasingly,

there are many variations of thesis-based degrees – DBA, mixed modes etc. This assumption has resulted in many HEPs and their unfortunate students paying the price by later intervention by external examiners or MQA’s Panel of Assessors (POA) who find the understanding to be problematic or not commonly held consistent with the PG programmes outcomes.

The HEP must engage with and apprise all supervisors of the requirements and expectations. Conceptual, theoretical and methodical rigors must be discussed and articulated to all supervisors; new and experienced, full time and part time. For example, do replication studies provide adequate evidence of the intellectual capability of the student? How much of writing assistance provided to the candidate is unacceptable? How about translating into the required language?

To the extent possible and practical, these common requirements, institutional standards and expectations must be discussed, documented and accessible to all supervisors.

2. Admission – qualifications, language proficiency, bridging programmes, remedial programmes, transfer of students etc.
 - a. The PG standards stipulate the basic minimum entry requirements for research-based programmes. The appropriate field/s of study for the proposed masters or doctoral programmes **MUST** be stated by the HEP. It is not satisfactory to be generic i.e. have a good masters or leaving the suitability issue to the Senate. The Senate has a role in reviewing masters and bachelor qualifications which are not in the field or cognate fields for admission.
 - b. Where a candidate is not in the field or cognate fields, the HEP **MUST** ensure the candidate is given adequate opportunity to acquire sufficient critical understanding of the discipline before allowing the candidate to commence the programme. Supervisor and/or the Senate **MUST** determine and have the candidate complete a bridging programme before fully admitting the candidate to the programme.
 - c. Where candidates are weak in aspects of the discipline or study which will impede the progress of the student, remedial courses must be considered both at the HEP and at other HEPs, if need be.
 - d. The HEP must have a clear policy, process and procedures on accepting students from other HEPs who have completed a part of the research work. This must include determination of the status of the candidate (failed, dismissed, withdrawal etc.) and the

claims on the research work carried out by the candidate especially those funded by grants with transferability restrictions.

3. Assignment of supervisors – suitable, experienced, trained and fully informed of the system (duties and responsibilities, discussion of programme outcomes and standards).
 - a. Criteria for the appointment of supervisors and co-supervisors
 - b. Responsibilities and duties of supervisors
 - c. Ethics of supervisors
 - d. Replacement of supervisors
 - e. External supervisors
4. Thesis guidelines including rules on translation.
 - a. A guideline which details the format to be followed - margins, fonts, spacing, thesis structure/s and illustration of the citation convention to be adhered to for documents, tables, figures, charts etc. If the programme requires portfolio or presentation or exhibition or artifact, the appropriate guidelines must be prepared for submission.
 - b. Increasingly, students who are linguistically or statistically challenged pay others for writing or data analytic services. The HEP must clearly draw lines on permitted and unpermitted type of assistance to preserve the integrity of the qualifications as a statement of the candidate's independent ability.
5. Research Policies – ethics policy, plagiarism policy, Intellectual Property (IP) and copyright policies, publications (authorship) policy, conflicts of interest policy for supervisors and external examiners.
 - a. Ethics policy
A clear ethics statement, decision structure, process and procedure must be spelled out to vet all research proposals for adherence to generally accepted principles in science and social research which protects the subjects' or respondents' rights, privacy, safety and security.
 - b. Plagiarism policy
A policy on the definition and scope with responsibility for dissemination of information about HEP's plagiarism policy, a system for vetting of assessment materials (e.g. Turnitin), procedures and guidance on actions by staff and administrators and range of disciplinary actions that can be meted out with due regard for due process.

- c. Publications policy
Whether publications are required for graduation, a clear policy on authorship rights of student vis-à-vis the supervisor/s must be stated clearly. In cases of pre-viva publications, multi-author publications of students' work submitted must clearly state the scope and scale of the students' intellectual contribution in the publications to avoid allegations of collaboratively produced theses.
 - d. Conflict of interests policy (supervisors and external examiners)
All situations which will compromise the professional and unbiased work of a supervisor or external examiner must be stated. This must deal with conflicts arising from family members, spouses, co-researchers, co-writers, children and siblings as supervisees or external examiners.
6. Assessment – defense of proposal, selection criteria for examiners, examination committee (membership, chair, role of chair, decisions) and appeal.
- a. The role and responsibility, the frequency, the criteria and communication and deliberation of the outcomes of monitoring must be clearly stated and shared with the student in writing.
 - b. The assessment points, responsibilities, process and criteria must be clearly documented and shared with the candidate.
 - i. Defense of Proposal: The candidate's research proposal must be formally assessed through a process involving a panel. The criteria for evaluation and the composition and responsibilities of the panel for such an assessment must be clearly stated and adhered to. The records of such assessment must be maintained for internal and external reviews.
 - ii. Viva Voce: The PG standard requires an oral examination of the candidate for doctoral programmes but encourages the practice for masters. The submission of thesis, the selection of external examiners, the transmission of thesis, the reception of their reports¹, the convening of the examination committee, the rules of the proceedings, the record of the corrections to be made, the decision choices and appeal must be clearly stated. This includes re-viva or the corrections of thesis

¹ There is a growing practice of using a structured assessment rubric with about 10 to 15 criteria and 5 levels of attainment in the assessment of the thesis by examiners. Although examiners are given space to add comments on the itemised assessments, most examiners make very general comments which are often times serious but lack specifics for action. A written report must be a requirement for the examiners to facilitate better understanding of the issues or concerns, and to address them.

(including corrections report by the candidate) and the confirmation of the corrections by a member of the examination committee excluding the Chair and the supervisor.

ACTION

All HEPs with PG research programmes must take stock of their programme management and where there are shortfalls, institute improvement actions. Help can be obtained from MQA or from MyQAN² or MPQ³ to learn from others. If these aspects are left unaddressed, MQA may consider the following actions.

1. MQA can **REFUSE** Provisional Accreditation if an application is found deficient in the aspects outline in the foregoing. Provisional Accreditation may also be accompanied with conditions to be fulfilled if some aspects are still not stated and adhered to.
2. Where an institution has the documented policies, processes and procedures (confirmed at the Provisional Accreditation stage) but not implemented effectively, Full Accreditation can be **DENIED** and graduates who have not been fully subjected to the various policies, excluded from the benefit of accreditation.
3. MQA expects that the policies, process and procedures outline in this advisory are implemented effectively on a continuing basis. If the Maintenance Audit reveals significant to serious weaknesses in adhering to these requirements, a **NOTICE OF WITHDRAWAL OF ACCREDITATION** can be issued, which can lead to withdrawal of accreditation.
4. In addition, when MQA detects serious failures in one thesis-based programme, it can **INITIATE THEMATIC AUDIT**, at the cost to the HEP, to ascertain the state of all thesis-based programmes irrespective of the stage of accreditation. This is to safeguard the integrity of MQA's accreditation and to arrest, and possibly reverse systemic weaknesses in thesis-based PG programmes in the HEPs.

² Malaysian Quality Assurance Network (all Universities and Colleges)

³ Mesyuarat Pengurusan Kualiti (Public Universities only)