

# South East Technological University (SETU) Research Degree Regulations (all research degree types level 9 & 10)

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Date: 07 May 2024  
Version 1.0

<b>Document Details</b>	
Document Title:	South East Technological University (SETU) Research Degree Regulations
Version:	1.0
Approved By:	Academic Council
Date Approved:	07/05/2024
Effective Date:	01/09/2024
Review Date:	Three year from approval or as updated by AC
Document Owner:	Vice President Research, Innovation and Impact

<b>Consultation Details</b>	
<b>Internal<sup>1</sup></b>	
Name:	Working groups including Graduate Studies, Registry, SETU PMO, Research Office, RPB Chairs, Supervisors, Learners, Heads of School/Faculty, Heads of Department, and School/Faculty Administrative staff to inform initial draft.
Date:	November 2022 – April 202
Details of Consultation:	Working groups aimed at implementation of Structured PhD programmes across SETU.
<b>Other<sup>2</sup></b>	
Name:	External review of SETU delivery of Structured PhD programmes.
Date:	April 2023 – October 2023
Details of Consultation:	Review of
<b>Internal</b>	
Name:	The draft regulations were presented to, and discussed with SETU management, Research Programme Board Chairs, Research and Research Programmes Committee, Executive Management Team, and Academic Council meetings.
Date:	October 2023 - May 2024

<sup>1</sup> Internal consultation with other departments within the University should be noted

<sup>2</sup> Other for instance staff representatives or other stakeholders

Details of Consultation:	Regulations drafted based on working group outputs and external review of Structured PhDs in SETU.
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<b>Revision History</b>		
Previous Version No.	Summary of Amendments	Version No.
N/A	Initial draft	0.1
0.1	Amendments were made to regulations arising from feedback during consultation noted above	1.0

<b>Publication Details</b>	
Where	Date
SETU website	10/06/2024
All Staff Email	10/06/2024

Feedback or issues arising on implementation of this policy should be communicated to the policy author.	
Policy Author	Graduate Studies, Office of Vice President of Research, Innovation and Impact

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# 1. Introduction and Context

This document sets out the regulations for the delivery of research degrees, i.e. Masters by Research, Structured PhD and Professional Doctorates, in SETU. This document establishes the underlying philosophy of research degrees in SETU, details the University’s approach to quality assurance in the delivery of research degrees and outlines the principles of research degrees at SETU. The research degrees within the scope of this document and their interconnectivities are depicted in Figure 1, as outlined by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)<sup>3</sup>. This document encompasses the elements of research degrees depicted in Figure 1, including entry requirements, the learner life cycle and award.

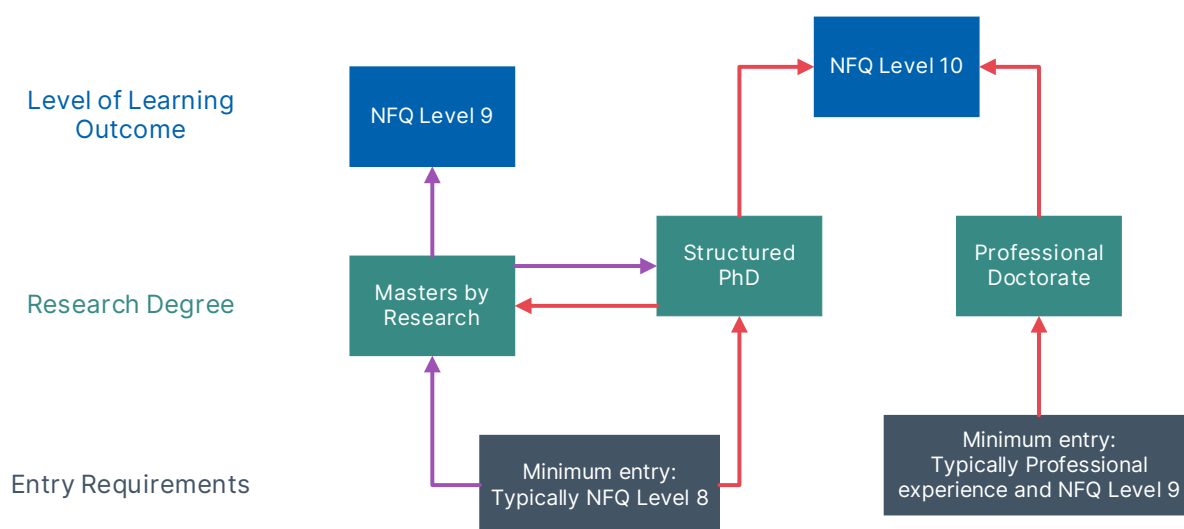


Figure 1. SETU research programmes within the scope of this document, adapted from Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)<sup>1</sup>.

The SETU Research Degree Regulations contributes to SETU Strategic Plan 2023-2028<sup>4</sup> and is informed by Ireland’s Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes<sup>1</sup>, Ireland’s National Framework for Doctoral Education<sup>5</sup> and European University Association position papers and reports, e.g. Doctoral Education – taking Salzburg Forward<sup>6</sup>, Doctoral education in Europe

<sup>3</sup> Quality and Qualifications Ireland, Ireland’s Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes.

<sup>4</sup> South East Technological University Strategic Plan, Connecting for Impact 2023-2028 (<https://www.setu.ie/about/setu-president/strategic-plan-2023-2028>)

<sup>5</sup> Higher Education Authority, National Framework for Doctoral Education, 2023

<sup>6</sup> European University Association, Doctoral Education – taking Salzburg Forward – Implementation and Challenges, 2016

today: approaches and institutional structures<sup>7</sup>, and Building the Foundations of Research<sup>8</sup>.

## 2. Underlying Philosophy

A research degree programme at SETU involves the learner conducting research in their subject area under the guidance of a supervisory team.

Research master's learners should develop a mastery of principles and theory of their discipline, competence in appropriate research methods, an ability to manage complexity, integrate knowledge and may contribute to the literature in a field<sup>7</sup>.

Structured PhD learners must demonstrate the ability to discover, analyse, evaluate, manage, conserve and communicate knowledge from a range of sources and think critically about problems in order to produce innovative solutions and create new knowledge<sup>7</sup>.

Professional doctorate learners should advance professional practice or use practice as a research method<sup>7</sup>.

The University recognises the unique nature of research degrees and the diversity of the learner cohort undertaking advanced research degrees. In the delivery of research degrees, SETU has the responsibility to:

- Ensure the availability of research supervision, appropriate support services, including wellbeing supports, and other resources necessary for the learner to conduct the research.
- Ensure the rigor and format of the assessment for the award of the degree is consistent and in line with National Framework of Qualifications<sup>9</sup>. A key aspect of postgraduate research, particularly at Level 10, is the contribution to new knowledge.
- Foster the formation of new research areas, while also facilitating the growth of established areas. This must be done in a manner that a learner has access to research and expertise in a learning community, which includes national and/or international expertise and training.

In delivering on these responsibilities, the University aims to foster the following values in its research degrees:

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<sup>7</sup> European University Association, Doctoral education in Europe today: approaches and institutional structures, 2019

<sup>8</sup> European University Association, Building the Foundations of Research – A Vision for the Future of Doctoral Education in Europe, 2023

<sup>9</sup> Quality and Qualifications Ireland, National Framework of Qualifications, <https://www.qqi.ie/national-framework-of-qualifications>

1. Research Excellence - The University endeavours to provide a research environment and culture with values and goals based on ethical behaviour, honesty, integrity, openness and trust. At SETU, these values and goals are instilled in the delivery of research degrees via training, supervision and the provision of quality assurance and governance structures.
2. Internationalisation - SETU endorses the delivery of research degrees in collaboration, or conjunction with other academic institutions. This can take the form of the inclusion of external supervisors as part of SETU supervisory teams, and/or the development of bilateral agreements, such as for a joint degree or Cotutelle agreement.
3. Impact - Research degrees contribute to SETU research impact by adding to existing knowledge and contributing to social, economic and cultural impact. SETU recognises that there are many forms of research impact and dissemination. Therefore, SETU accepts submissions for examination for research degrees in various formats, for example, portfolio or performance, as deemed appropriate for the area of research for an individual research project.
4. Interdisciplinarity - The research portfolio in SETU is diverse and can incorporate interdisciplinary teams. While learners are registered in the SETU discipline area of their primary supervisor, supervisory teams can be diverse and can include supervisors from across disciplines, including across Departmental/School/Faculty structures and across SETU campuses. Furthermore, learners can engage with training across Departmental/School/Faculty structures, across campuses or externally to SETU.
5. Engaged Research - Engagement with external stakeholders and the further development of collaborations with external partners allows for the development of impactful research at postgraduate level. Co-supervisors or advisors from external non-academic organisations for learners registered on research degrees at SETU can create a link between academic research and its impacts on society, the economy and culture.
6. Researcher development - Research degree training focuses on the development of learners for potential careers that meet the needs of industry, academia and organisation, including the national, international, and regional needs in the South East. This requires the provision of both formal and informal development opportunities for learners' development that address personal and professional development as well as the academic and/or technical aspects of the specific area of research.
7. Equality, Diversity and Inclusion – Each research degree is a unique programme to the learner, therefore, these can be flexible, for example in terms of mode of study, training plans and can be inter/cross/multi-disciplinary. SETU promotes equality of learning experience for all learners on research degree programmes. To promote equality, diversity and

inclusion in our research learner cohort at SETU, competitive funded research positions should be advertised beyond the University website and recruitment should be open, transparent and merit based. An inclusive culture will be provided for research postgraduate learners in SETU, including support services, academic lectures and networking events.

### 3. Purpose of Research Degree Regulations

These regulations underpin the quality assurance and principles for the delivery of research degrees in SETU, in line with national and international best practice, to meet the strategic objectives of the University in relation to graduate education and research.

The University recognises that each research degree is a unique undertaking, this document provides the underlying requirements for the support and quality assurance of all research degrees in SETU. Therefore, these regulations outlines the responsibilities and values of the University in the delivery of research degrees, including the structures in place for quality assurance of these degrees.

The core principles that must be met for the delivery of research degrees are also outlined. These ensure quality in the delivery of research degrees in SETU.

### 4. SETU Approach to Quality Assurance in the Delivery of Research Degrees

The operation of research degrees in SETU ensures quality in its delivery via the quality assurance structures in the University, as follows:

- The day-to-day management of each individual research degree, including the research and training plan, is between the supervisory team and the learner. Within each supervisory team, there should be a reassurance of continuity of supervision of the project for the length of the programme, i.e. a contract of employment in SETU for at least one member of the supervisory team extending for the length of the research programme. Furthermore, quality assurance within the supervision team is achieved through the Principles of Research Degree Delivery at SETU - Research Supervision, below.
- Research postgraduates are an integral part of SETU, in particular, within a School/Faculty/Department. Therefore, each learner must be registered within the School/Faculty/Department of their primary supervisor to ensure that the learner meets the required milestones as set out in the Principles of Research Degree Delivery at SETU below.



- Research examination boards approve the progress of research learners from year-to-year of their programme, as well as the results from taught element of their programme. Research Examination Boards also recommend the overall award of the degree to the learner, after the final examination criteria have been met.
- Research Programme boards offer oversight and governance of quality and operations of research degrees in SETU, as well as a strategic link between research in Schools/Faculties/Departments and Academic Council. Programme Boards are responsible for assuring and enhancing the academic quality of the programme under its remit and for reporting annually to Academic Council on its progress in this regard.
- Graduate Studies facilitates and ensures the implementation of the Principles of Research Degrees in Schools/Facilities. In doing so, Graduate Studies have representation at Research Examination Boards and Research Programme Boards and can report to Academic Council, if necessary.
- Academic council ratify examination board outcomes for research degrees, including taught module results and award of degree recommendations. Academic Council also engage with strategic elements of research degree development through subcommittees and Research Programme Boards.

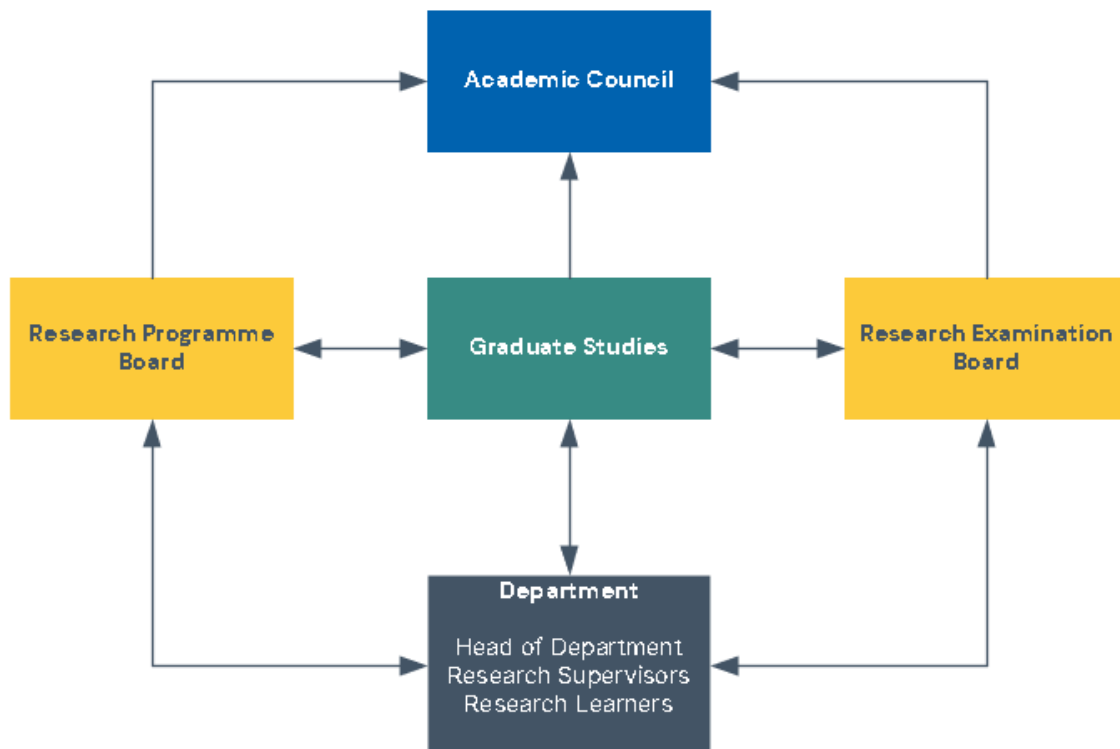


Figure 2: SETU quality assurance structures for the operation of research degrees.

## 5. Principles of Research Degree Delivery at SETU

The following principles govern the delivery of research degrees in SETU and are informed by Ireland's Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes<sup>10</sup>, Ireland's National Framework for Doctoral Education<sup>11</sup> and the National Framework of Qualifications<sup>12</sup>. These principles are delivered through the quality assurance structure previously identified in order for SETU to meet its responsibility and achieve the values outlined above. These principles identify the core elements for the delivery of research degrees at SETU.

### 5.1. Programme Structure

A Masters by Research is a 2-year full-time programme (4 years for part-time registration) with the learner's original research presented in a thesis (or other format appropriate to the research area) being the only means of assessment for the award of the degree.

A Structured PhD (SETU's main PhD programme) is a 4-year full-time programme (8 years for part-time registrations), which includes the completion of 30 ECTS and the submission of the learner's original research presented in a thesis (or other format appropriate to the research area) for assessment for the award of the degree. While the taught elements of the programme do not count towards the final award of the degree, they are a requirement of the programme for the learner to be permitted to present for examination of their research thesis (or equivalent). Programme details for learners registered on a Traditional PhD (without the requirement for credits), under legacy regulations, are outlined below.

A Professional Doctorate is typically a minimum of a 4-year part-time course, divided into 3 Phases. During Phase 1 (Years 1 and 2) there are specialist research workshops. In Phase 2 (Years 3 and 4) participants undertake a cumulative research paper series. Phase 3 involves the production and defence of the thesis.

### 5.2. Admissions

At minimum, prospective candidates for a Masters by Research or Structured PhD research programme must provide evidence of an Honours Bachelor Degree

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<sup>10</sup> Quality and Qualifications Ireland, Ireland's Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes

<sup>11</sup> Higher Education Authority, National Framework for Doctoral Education, 2023

<sup>12</sup> Quality and Qualifications Ireland, National Framework of Qualifications, <https://www.qqi.ie/national-framework-of-qualifications>

(Level 8, as per National Qualification Framework) qualification, or prior learning equivalent.

Professional Doctorate candidates must provide evidence of sufficient academic qualifications (typically Masters degree) and also have sufficient work experience at the required level for the programme e.g. five years management experience, ideally at a senior level.

All prospective candidates must meet the SETU English Language Requirements.

### **5.3. Research Supervision**

For Masters by Research and Structured PhD learners, a supervisory team must be approved prior to registration.

The supervisory team must consist of a primary supervisor, who is a member of staff in SETU, with a qualification at the same level (or higher) to the award being sought by the learner.

At least one member of the supervisory team must have supervised a learner to completion of an award equal to or higher than that being sought by the incoming learner.

In the case of Professional Doctorate learners, a supervisory team is appointed for the learner in Phase 1 of the programme.

### **5.4. Research and Training Plan**

Learners registered on Research Masters or Structured PhD programmes must have an approved Research and Training Plan submitted to Graduate Studies within the first 6 months of registration. Failure to do so will result in a probationary notice being issued to the learner warning that failure to submit an approved Research and Training Plan can result in the learner being ineligible to register for the next year of their research programme.

Learner progress is measured against the approved Research and Training Plan.

An updated approved Research and Training Plan can be submitted to Graduate Studies at any time to reflect any changes in the research project or training plan.

### **5.5. Taught element of a research degree**

All Structured PhD students must complete 30 ECTS of Universal Modules and Project-specific modules before nominations of examiners for their final examination are processed. Of these, 5 ECTS must have been acquired from the *Research Integrity and Ethics* module, which should be completed in the first

year of study. Structured PhD learners must have completed 15 ECTS at the time of PhD Confirmation.

While not required, Masters by Research learners can choose to complete accredited modules. If a Masters by Research learner wishes to transfer to a Structured PhD register, they must provide an updated training plan which outlines the plan towards completing 30 ECTS as part of the Structured PhD. It is recommended that such learners have completed 15 ECTS at the time of transfer.

Professional Doctorate learners must complete the Workshop elements of their programme in Phase 1 of the programme.

### **5.6. Assessment of progress**

All Masters by Research and PhD learners' progress is assessed at least once per academic year to determine eligibility to progress to the next year of their programme. There are two possible outcomes from the progression assessment process that can be recorded at a Research Examination Board, as follows:

- Satisfactory - eligible to progress.
- Unsatisfactory - in this case a remedial plan must be in place for the learner to make progress, failure to meet these requirements before the next Research Examination Board will result in the learner being deemed ineligible to register for the next year of their programme.

There are three Phases to the only current professional doctorate in the university – the doctorate in business administration (DBA). The confirmation of DBA (and passage from DBA Phase 1 to DBA Phase 2) being decided before Workshops 5 (of five Workshops) of DBA Phase 1. The examination of the DBA programme operates on the basis of accumulation of credits over the entire programme. Thus, credits are accumulated in Phase 1 for the workshop assessments, in Phase 2 for the panel-examined papers and in Phase 3 for the DBA thesis and viva voce.

### **5.7. PhD Confirmation**

All PhD learners in SETU must strive to complete a PhD Confirmation in Year 2 of full-time registration (Year 3 or 4 of part-time registration).

The learner must submit a document of at least 5,000 words outlining the work completed to date and the plan for completion of the Structured PhD for assessment by at least one Reviewer external to the project. Artefacts, portfolios or similar may also be submitted for assessment, if appropriate to the research area.

PhD Confirmation Reviewers must hold a Level 10 qualification.

A confirmation interview should take place to assess the learner's suitability to continue on the PhD register.

The possible outcomes from the confirmation interview are as follows:

- PhD registration confirmed.
- Extension of probationary period of PhD registration by 3 months with a repeat confirmation interview.
- Transfer to a Masters register and recommend submission of a Masters by Research degree.
- Recommend deregistration from the programme.

### **5.8. Transfer between research degree registers (Masters by Research and Structured PhD)**

The process for Transfer from a Masters by Research to a Structured PhD register is identical to the PhD Confirmation process described in §5.7. The possible outcomes of a transfer interview are:

- PhD registration confirmed.
- Extension of Masters by Research registration by 3 months with a repeat Transfer interview.
- Recommend learner remains on the Masters by Research register and recommend submission of a Masters by Research degree.
- Recommend deregistration from the programme.

It is also possible to change from a Structured PhD register to a Masters by Research Register, as depicted in Figure 1.

### **5.9. Final Examination**

The final examination of a research degree in SETU is completed by two examiners who are qualified to the level of the degree being examined, experienced in the area of research and approved by SETU Academic Council. At least one examiner must be external to SETU.

The learner must submit a thesis, artefact, portfolio, or equivalent as per the research area norms to Graduate Studies for examination.

Research by Masters submissions are initially examined by the examiners, who can choose an outcome from this examination, or can request a viva voce to be organised for further assessment to determine the suitability of the work for the award of a Master by Research.

All PhD and Professional Doctorate submissions are examined by viva voce as well as the assessment of the submitted thesis (or equivalent).

The possible outcomes of a PhD or DBA viva voce are:

1. Recommend the award of degree.
2. Recommend the award of degree subject to the Candidate making Minor Corrections to the dissertation.
3. Refer the dissertation for modification by the Candidate before award of degree.
4. Refer the dissertation for substantial amendment by the Candidate and re-examination.
5. Not recommended for award of degree sought.

#### **5.10. Legacy Traditional PhD Students**

Learners who were admitted onto a Traditional PhD programme, prior to 2022, are not required to complete taught modules.

Traditional PhD learners' progress must be assessed in accordance to §5.6.

Traditional PhD learners must complete a Transfer process, as outlined in §5.8 to confirm their PhD registration status.

The final examination of a Traditional PhD programme is as outlined in §5.9.

#### **5.11. Operational procedures for research degrees**

The Graduate Studies Office publishes detailed operational procedures for research degrees which are updated periodically.