

# Rates of qualification from postgraduate research degrees

## PITG 13/08

### Issue

1. At their June 2012 meeting, members of the PITG noted the HEFCE publication of rates of qualification from postgraduate research degrees<sup>1</sup> which gave the projected study outcomes of full-time students starting postgraduate research degrees in 2008-09 and 2009-10 by institution. The group requested more information on the definitions and coverage used.
2. This paper is provided for information: no actions or decisions are required in response.

### Discussion

3. In keeping with a commitment to support excellence in the national research base, HEFCE has required the research degree programmes we support through our grant to meet minimum standards set out in the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) code of practice.
4. HEFCE's 2012 report introduced an alternative approach to measuring rates of qualification from research degree study. It made use of a method similar to that currently employed by table series T5 of the PIs to project the study outcomes of full-time first degree study, and sought to replace HEFCE's previous calculation of research degree qualification rates (RDQRs).
5. The analysis has sought to identify institutions whose HESA returns indicate a low proportion of research students projected to qualify within a given time, compared to the average in the sector, having taken into account factors which we know have a significant bearing on qualification rates<sup>2</sup>. Qualification rates such as these and the previous RDQRs have been intended as one measure by which the quality of research degree programmes could be assessed.
6. HEIs in England reviewed the outcomes generated by the new method in winter 2011. Each HEI was provided with its own results, along with overall results for the sector and an explanation of the method. Institutions were invited to provide feedback on the method and the results generated. Some institutions identified errors in their underlying data submitted to HESA which led to suppression of their results along with an explanation of the reasons for this suppression.
7. For the first publication, the intention was to establish the method and to embed understanding of its underlying principles. The method in the report currently makes no consideration of research degree students who were domiciled outside of the European Union (EU), or those who studied part-time in the year they commenced their research degree. In due course, and on the basis of an enhanced understanding of the study

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<sup>1</sup> Available at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2012/201210/>.

<sup>2</sup> Factors known to impact on a student's chances of completing their doctoral degree within a given time frame were described in 'PhD research degrees: Entry and completion' (HEFCE 2005/02) and included: mode of study; domicile; subject area of study; source of funding; age; ethnicity and qualifications on entry.

patterns of such students, it is likely that further development would lead to a complementary version of this method that would consider a population of non-EU domiciled students, and/or small institutional populations of research degree starters. Additional measures may also be developed that are appropriate for consideration of part-time research degree starters and starters on other forms of postgraduate research programmes of study.

8. For a cohort of full-time research degree starters registered at English HEIs, we have projected the proportions that are likely to be in each of three 'end states' after a period of 25 years, based on the recent patterns of students at the institution. That is, the proportion of the cohort expected to have qualified (with either a research degree or with another postgraduate qualification), transferred to another institution, or become absent from HE in the 25 years following commencement of their research degree. The report also provides these projected outcomes after a seven-year period.

9. In an approach consistent with that used for the PIs, students are not included if they left the programme of study within 50 days of commencement. There is no adjustment for individual reasons for non-qualification. The method does make an adjustment for students who appear to convert a full-time MPhil qualification to a research degree and seeks to include these students within the starting population.

10. To ensure that the data used in the projections are robust, we define the progression pattern of a research degree student by reference to four years of data. These are the 'reference year' – the year in which the cohort of interest commence their research degree programmes, and to which the projections relate - the two academic years prior to the reference year, and the academic year following the reference year. In essence, four years of data are required because we have added two matrices together to try and achieve stable matrices: one of the problems associated with this method applied to postgraduate populations.

11. As with Table 5 of the Performance Indicators, a transition matrix is constructed on the basis of the 'states' that we observe postgraduate research students to be in in the relevant years described at paragraph 11. For each institution, we observe the numbers of students who moved from one state in a particular year to another state in the following year. An assumption that the pattern of progression identified is typical for the institution allows us to make use of the transition matrix to anticipate a student's final state 25 years after the commencement of their studies. These 'final states' are then categorised into a projected study outcome.

12. Alongside the projected proportions we present a sector-adjusted average (benchmark) and, where appropriate, an indicator which highlights significant variation of the actual projection from the sector-adjusted average. Supplementary tables, which are consistent with those produced to accompany Table 5 of the Performance Indicators, have also been provided alongside the publication. The sector-level transition matrix published in relation to the qualification rates of 2009-10 full-time postgraduate research degree starters is provided at Annex A.

## Further information

13. For further information contact Alison Brunt (Phone: 0117 931 7166; e-mail: [a.brunt@hefce.ac.uk](mailto:a.brunt@hefce.ac.uk)).

14. Full technical details relating to the method described by this paper are published at Annex A of HEFCE 2012/10, available at <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2012/201210/>.

# Annex A

State 0 (%)	Qualified with research degree award	Qualified with MPhil award	Full-time research degree, year of study 1	Full-time research degree, year of study 2	Full-time research degree, year of study 3	Full-time research degree, year of study 4	Full-time research degree, year of study 5	Full-time research degree, year of study 6	Full-time research degree, year of study 7 or above	Full- or part-time MPhil	Part-time research degree	Writing up research degree, year of study 0, 1 or 2	Writing up research degree, year of study 3 or above	Transfer	Inactive	Absent	Total number of students
Qualified with research degree award	100.0																
Qualified with MPhil award		100.0															
Full-time research degree, year of study 1	0.1	0.0	3.7	88.0	1.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	1.8	0.7	0.0	0.7	3.1	0.0	<b>18,273</b>
Full-time research degree, year of study 2	0.1	0.2	0.2	3.6	85.2	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.3	2.2	0.2	4.0	0.6	2.9	0.0	<b>17,274</b>
Full-time research degree, year of study 3	2.2	0.0	0.1	0.2	3.5	28.2	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.1	1.8	0.1	59.1	0.3	4.0	0.0	<b>16,035</b>
Full-time research degree, year of study 4	17.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	3.9	19.6	0.3	0.0	0.2	2.4	0.0	44.3	0.3	10.9	0.0	<b>4,725</b>
Full-time research degree, year of study 5	42.3	0.2	0.2	0.0	0.1	0.2	3.0	16.2	0.5	0.5	2.2	0.1	19.4	0.6	14.7	0.0	<b>1,187</b>
Full-time research degree, year of study 6	32.1	0.6	0.3	0.0	0.3	0.0	0.3	2.0	20.8	0.6	1.4	0.0	19.9	0.6	21.1	0.0	<b>346</b>
Full-time research degree, year of study 7 or above	25.1	1.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4	18.7	1.6	3.2	0.0	18.3	0.4	30.7	0.0	<b>251</b>
Full- or part-time MPhil	1.0	17.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	46.7	0.0	1.2	7.6	2.3	24.3	0.0	<b>2,301</b>
Part-time research degree	6.3	0.1	0.0	0.2	0.8	0.9	0.6	0.3	0.1	0.5	59.4	0.3	17.3	0.6	12.4	0.0	<b>2,969</b>
Writing up research degree, year of study 0, 1 or 2	4.9	47.3	1.2	0.3	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.0	0.2	10.4	19.6	0.4	13.7	0.0	<b>1,166</b>
Writing up research degree, year of study 3 or above	38.2	1.1	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.5	1.4	0.5	0.4	0.1	0.5	0.4	46.7	0.1	10.2	0.0	<b>24,122</b>
Transfer														100.0			
Inactive	30.4	2.1	0.2	0.2	1.0	0.9	0.6	0.3	0.2	0.9	1.2	0.4	3.7	0.9	0.0	57.0	<b>5,940</b>
Absent																100.0	

