

**The monitoring of
admission and supervision of
PhD students**

A report on good practice

**New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit
Te Wāhanga Tātari**

August 2007

This report on good practice is addressed to:

Deans of Postgraduate Studies (and equivalent) in New Zealand universities
Quality Managers (and equivalent) in New Zealand universities
The New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee

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1 Background

The policy statement *Domestic status for new international PhD students from 1 January 2006*, signed in October 2005 by the then Minister of Education and Chair of the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee, requires the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit to provide the Ministry of Education and New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee with a periodic monitoring report on the implementation of the scheme at each participating university.

The first monitoring exercise took place during May and June 2007, and was limited to processes associated with four aspects of PhD admission and supervision:

- the assessment of the status of supervisors,
- the admission of students,
- the screening of the literacy abilities of applicants,
- supervision and support.

The exercise has involved three stages.

- As a first stage, a report was prepared for each university following an examination of documentation and written materials (such as regulations, policies, publications) and samples of files associated with the admission and supervision of international PhD students. The appropriate report was sent to the university reviewed, with a copy sent to the Ministry of Education and to the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee.
- As a second stage, a summary report comparing the universities was prepared, which identified elements common to all universities and the range of approaches to the administration and supervision of international PhD students across the university sector. The report was addressed to the Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee.
- As a third stage, this report identifies good practice models which draw on good practice to be found across the university sector. It is addressed to Deans of Postgraduate Studies (or equivalent), Quality Managers (or equivalent) in all New Zealand universities, and the New Zealand Vice-Chancellors' Committee.

The dominant message given by all universities was that all PhD students, both domestic and international, must undergo the same academic scrutiny at the time of admission, and must be given the same high quality of supervisory care. Thus a monitoring exercise intended to ensure robust policies and practices in the area of admission and supervision of international PhD students resulted in the identification of good practice for PhD admission and supervision for all PhD students. Universities asked that this be shared.

One area specific to international students is the testing of English literacy abilities. Additionally, international students are entering a learning environment and a living environment that may differ from that from which they come. Universities recognise their responsibilities for the welfare of international students by providing student support services which match the requirements and spirit of the *Code of practice for the pastoral care of international students* administered by the Ministry of Education.

2 Common elements

The monitoring exercise demonstrated that while the eight universities have developed their own processes, there are several common understandings.

- 2.1 All PhD students, whether domestic or international, are entitled to the same high quality of supervisory care. Academics are appointed to universities as the result of international searches, which require academic staff to be of very good national or international standard as researchers. Academic staff are also required to be proficient in teaching, and the chief supervisors must be actively engaged in research in the candidates' fields of study. Universities also require those appointed as the chief (or 'main' or 'principal' – terminology differs) supervisors are to be experienced in supervision, with a general requirement that prior to appointment as chief supervisors, academic staff must have gained experience as part of successful supervisory teams, and must have attended workshops and/or seminars designed specifically for chief supervisors prior to being appointed as such. Thus both the quality of active research in the field *and* experience in supervision are prerequisites to being appointed as a chief supervisor.
- 2.2 The PhD degree is staff-intensive and resource-intensive. Thus prior to accepting applicants as candidates, Heads of Department are required to carry out careful assessments of applicants' qualifications, experiences and abilities to cope with their research programmes, and of departments' abilities to provide supervisory teams with adequate supervision experience and expertise, resources, funding and high quality supervisory care. Heads of Department recommendations are approved at Faculty/School/Division (terminology differs) and institutional levels. This applies to both international and domestic applicants.
- 2.3 Registration is normally *provisional* or *conditional* in the first instance. Upon the successful completion of an acceptable research proposal, normally within 12 months, full registration is *confirmed*. This period of provisional/conditional registration allows for the testing of the ability of the candidate, the appropriateness of the research project as a PhD topic, and the compatibility of the supervisor and candidate.
- 2.4 High quality research standards, research activities and supervision by supervisory teams are required by all universities for all students, domestic as well as international. This is carefully monitored by means of regular reporting by the candidates and supervisors in progress reports. These report on the progress of the

research projects in terms of the research and writing competencies of the candidates; the quality of the interaction between supervisors and candidates in the research endeavour; and the writing up of the thesis which reports the process and results of the research. Candidates and supervisors are required to see each other's comments.

- 2.5 PhD research is a difficult and long process, and sustained research of this kind is usually a new experience for candidates. Therefore universities provide candidates with comprehensive handbooks which set out details of the process from the time of application through to the time of graduation. To varying degrees, the handbooks contain information on research context; the processes associated with provisional/conditional registration and confirmation of registration; writing research proposals; undertaking research both on-campus and off-campus; roles and expectations of supervisors and candidates; research ethics; research advice; intellectual property; resources available; student services; health and safety; resolution of problems; writing of a thesis; examination procedures; and postdoctoral opportunities.

3 Good practice model across the university sector

By monitoring all eight universities over a short period of time, it has been possible to develop a sense of good practice across the sector. This report sets out what would appear to be a good practice model for all PhD students, domestic as well as international, as is demonstrated across the university sector in three of the four areas. As aspects of this good practice are to be found in different universities, it was considered inappropriate to identify what is happening at each university. Upon request, the Unit will be happy to provide more specific information if enquirers wish to make contact direct with those universities where the various aspects of the good practice are to be found operating.

3.1 The assessment of the status of supervisors

Appropriate criteria for assessing the status of their researchers, including those who are new and emerging of high potential and those who have been recently appointed, as being of very good national or international standard, with a research record appropriate to the student's field of study.

The policy statement *Domestic status for new international PhD students from 1 January 2006* carries the promise that universities will appoint as supervisors for international PhD students members of staff who are of very good national or international standard as researchers. As stated in section 2.1 above, all universities are of the view that all PhD students, whether domestic or international, are entitled to the same high quality of supervisory care, and the quality of the research standards, research activity and supervision experience in supervisory teams is the same for all students, domestic as well as international, especially if international standards of research supervision are to be maintained. Academic staff are, by their appointment to the universities, of very good national or international standard as researchers. The universities responses to that requirement in the policy statement varied.

One university now requires sign-off by Heads of Department against the policy statement requirement that supervisors are of very good national or intentional standard as researchers. This is based on the principle that Heads of Department are in the best position to do this, and that they are the most relevant people to take this responsibility. Another university has

recently amended its application form to require sign-off against such a statement in the case of all applicants, domestic as well as international. One university has developed guidelines for the appointment of supervisors that interpret the policy statement, thus setting a benchmark for the use of Heads of Department. One university requires a list of recent publications in the relevant fields to be attached to applications for registration, thus providing evidence to the Dean of Postgraduate Studies (or equivalent) who signs-off at institutional level. Another university requires a summary of the supervisors' qualifications, areas of research expertise and details for postgraduate supervisory experience to be attached to registration applications. That same university provides an electronic template and expects staff to maintain an up-to-date electronic form which is available for printing at any time, thus saving the creation of such lists for each application. Two universities maintain registers of supervisors, and academic staff who wish to 'register' and take on the role of supervisors of research degrees must provide evidence of relevant and recent publications and supervisory experience.

On considering the different approaches taken by universities, good practice suggests that the University should interpret the policy statement that supervisors should be of very good national or international standard as researchers, and prepare guidelines consistent with the statement for the use of Heads of Department when they propose names of supervisors.

3.2 The admission of students

Stringent student admission approval processes through faculty admissions offices, departmental supervisory panels, approval from the Head of School and/or approval from postgraduate or doctoral research advisory committees.

3.2.1 Regulations

Degree regulations are to be found in each University Calendar, and each university has its own approach to regulations, to the language used in regulations, to role of the formal documentation in the University Calendar, and to the necessity for each student to have access to the University Calendar.

Regulations provide not just guidance and a description of expectations; regulations also provide the regulatory basis for action. Some universities prefer to keep the regulations as short as possible, with policy documents and handbooks providing detailed information to assist committees carry out their tasks, and to assist students through the application process and through the various aspects of the candidature. Most PhD regulations contain detailed descriptions of the processes relating to the conduct of the examination of the thesis, but many are less explicit about registration and supervision. Many of the PhD regulations are silent about a number of requirements in the areas of registration and supervision, and this can call into question the regulatory basis for the requirements detailed in policy documents.

Good practice suggests that the regulations should be as comprehensive as is necessary to the proper setting out of requirements and the protection of the candidate and the University. Regulations which demonstrated good practice were those that were comprehensive. In the areas of application/registration and supervision (the focus of the 2007 monitoring exercise), such good practice regulations included the following.

- ***Description of the degree***

The nature of a PhD study – advanced research carried out to internationally recognised standards, the exercise of critical and analytical judgement, results

presented in a thesis that is scholarly written, presented, formatted and makes an original contribution to the literature.

- **Description of the registration process**

The criteria and process for application for provisional/conditional registration; the criteria for confirmation to full registration.

- **Description of supervision**

The characteristics of a supervisor – suitably qualified, actively involved in research in the candidate’s field, supported by a co-supervisor or supervisory team.

The role of the supervisor – to set out a timeframe for the research in consultation with the candidate, to support the research activity, to be available to interact with the candidate.

The role of the candidate – to help determine and keep to the timeframe, to undertake necessary tasks, apply critical judgement, interact with the supervisor.

- **Description of the role of the Head of Department**

To assess the eligibility and capability of the candidate, the ability and capability of the department to provide satisfactory supervision, adequate resources and facilities.

3.2.2 Regulations with guidelines

Regulations tend to stay in the University Calendar, or are quoted in student handbooks.

Two universities, however, follow a good practice by preparing an independent document which presents the regulations with a guideline for each regulation. Each guideline is placed immediately after the regulation to which it refers, and thereby provides an explanatory note to the regulation – sometimes quite a comprehensive note. The guidelines collectively provide the policy and procedures for the implementation of the regulations. The universities provide this document to staff and candidates, in one case as an attractive little booklet, matching the format of its comprehensive postgraduate studies handbook. The principal advantage of setting down guidelines next to the regulations to which they refer is the strongest possible alignment between the guidelines with the regulations, emphasising the relationship of one to the other. Any change of regulation or guideline requires attention to continuing this alignment.

3.3 English literacy

Scrutiny of the results of IELTS or TOEFL tests for international students for whom English is a second language, to ensure appropriate literacy abilities.

Given that the language of supervision, training and writing up of the research thesis is overwhelmingly in English, it is imperative that all acceptable applicants have good English literacy skills, particularly in communication and writing. All universities are careful to require evidence of achievement of one of the common banks of tests (such as IELTS or TOEFL). Any waiver is granted only if specified criteria are met – such as the language of instruction of the prerequisite qualification is in English, or personal and demonstrated knowledge of the language ability of the applicant as certified by the chief supervisor and supported by the Head of Department. The level of final approval of waiver varies. One university requires approval by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic); most incorporate

waiver of English into the approval process, which, in most cases, requires sign off by the Dean of Postgraduate Studies or equivalent, but which, in two cases, requires sign-off at faculty level.

Good practice suggests that sign-off on waiver of English literacy requirements should be at institutional level, outside of the faculty/division/school concerned.

3.4 Supervision

Appropriate levels of supervision and support for students.

3.4.1 Levels of administration

The administration of PhD regulations, admission, supervision and examination is carried out at various levels.

- The standard of PhD research, its supervision and the quality of support for candidates are the responsibilities of departments who are best placed to judge standards within their discipline areas. Departments are situated within a faculty/division/school (the terminology differs), each of which comprises departments of related disciplines.
- Faculties/divisions/schools may have their own doctoral, postgraduate or research committees which consider PhD matters arising from the departments within their responsibility. The chairs of these committees scrutinise and sign-off on applications and progress reports.
- Universities have central committees with oversight for maintaining relevant and up-to-date regulations and policies associated with the PhD. They carry different names – such as Postgraduate Studies Committee, Doctoral Studies Board, Doctoral Research Committee – and the executive decisions of the committee are usually taken by its chair who may also carry a designation – most commonly, Dean of Postgraduate Studies.
- University-wide administration of admission, registration, progress and examination of PhD candidates is usually managed by a central office – a Graduate Centre, Postgraduate Studies Office, Graduate Research School – which may also act as the secretariat to the central committee.

Within this overall structure, some universities give considerable autonomy to faculties/divisions/schools, with central postgraduate offices playing more of a monitoring role in some aspects of the operation. In universities where faculties/divisions/schools have final sign-off on progress reports, the faculties/divisions/schools present periodic reports to the central office and committee. These reports provide opportunities for faculties/divisions/schools to raise issues that they have identified as appropriate to report. It is accepted that there are different demands arising from the different nature of discipline needs and cultures, and that there is benefit from having professional responsibility imbedded throughout the university.

The PhD degree is an institutional degree, not a faculty-based degree as are Masters research degrees. *Good practice suggests that, for the PhD, institutional sign-off by a central office, committee or officer on every stage of application, registration and confirmation, progress reports and the examination of the thesis, provides an on-going independent monitoring of progress reports and an independent identification of issues of institutional concern.*

Good practice also suggests that strong institutional standards can be more easily maintained where a Graduate Centre/Research School, through the Dean of Postgraduate Studies, signs-off at every stage of the candidature, requiring acceptance of institutional regulations and the realisation of institutional expectations. A central office facilitates the monitoring of the whole University to ensure compatible research training and experience by all students across the institution consistent with the culture of research and research training across all faculties/divisions/schools. A central office also provides an identifiable source of independent and consistent information and advice to staff and students. It also provides an identifiable and independent agency for the handling of grievances which is have not been resolved at department and faculty/division/school levels.

3.4.2 Supervisory agreement

Universities have policies with respect to the provision of resources for PhD candidates and expectations of supervisor and candidates, and it is understood that there may well be specialist facilities required for some discipline areas. At the very least, all universities expect discussions between supervisors and candidates as early as possible during the candidature. But beyond that, practice varies. As examples, one university provides a supervision agreement template outlining each party's rights and responsibilities including resources, which all candidates and supervisors are encouraged to complete; another university regards the acceptance of a research degree candidate as representing the commitment to provide the essential resources specified by the university. Some universities require more formal evidence for such discussions having taken place: one requires sign-off on a 'research agreement' or 'statement of expectations' at the time of provisional registration or confirmation of registration; another requires sign-off on a list of resources required at the time of provisional registration; another requires sign-off on a supervision agreement at the time of confirmation of registration; and another requires agreement between the student, supervisor and Head of School about resource required for the project to be part of the record of registration.

Good practice suggests that these two things – provision of resources and the expectations of supervisors and candidates – should come together in an agreed research supervisory agreement, signed-off by the supervisor(s) and candidate, either before provisional/conditional enrolment is approved, or at the time of confirmation of registration. Such a statement should cover the following matters:

- *an understanding by both the supervisor and the candidate of the regulations,*
- *an understanding by the candidate of the nature of research and the requirements of writing a thesis,*
- *a clear statement as to the candidate's role and responsibilities*
- *a clear statement as to the supervisor's role and responsibilities*
- *a clear statement as to the resources that will be made available by the department, fulfilling the minimum expectations of the University and stating other resources available, especially those related to the distinctive requirements of the discipline,*
- *a clear statement as to ethical requirements arising from the topic of the research,*
- *a clear statement as to the university's policy on intellectual property rights,*
- *an agreement on the timeframe for the research, the timing of meetings and other contacts between the supervisor and candidate,*

- *a statement as to the need to report on progress during the candidature.*

Another good practice observed by one university is the production of a one-page pamphlet (A3 size, folded) which lists on one sheet the ten most important qualities of the ideal graduate research supervisor, and the ten most substantial problems faced by students in postgraduate research supervision. It is a direct, uncomplicated and informative document.

3.4.2 Progress reports

An important tool for monitoring the progress of all PhD candidates is the progress report. Universities differ in the timing of reports. Some require reports every 6 months; one university requires a report every 12 months; one university requires a report after 6 months, and a second report after 15 months (18 months in the case of one discipline area). The universities themselves know what works best for them. For a programme in which the research proceeds precisely as anticipated with no events to disturb steady progress, 12 monthly reporting is probably sufficient. However, the examination of samples of files suggested that for a programme during which unforeseen factors impact on the progress of the candidate – from difficulties of access to materials or data, or a need to change the course of the research, to a range of personal problems including illness or the need to suspend registration – then more frequent reporting provided a stronger support for the candidate in dealing with these factors, and a greater assurance for the University of the candidate's ability to complete the programme and submit the thesis.

Good practice suggests that there be provision for more regular reporting if circumstances suggest this to be desirable.

In general, a progress report requires the details of the candidate's progress against the objectives set for the previous period of time, and the setting of the candidate's objectives for the period of time through to the next report.

Good practice suggests the progress report form contain a clear explanation – at the head of the form, or at the head of each section of the form – as to

- *the purpose of the report form,*
- *the use to be made of the report form, and*
- *the necessity for all parties to be honest and open in completing their sections.*

Good practice also suggests each report should include:

- *the candidate's rating of the supervision – expertise, availability of supervisor(s), helpfulness of advice, financial support and resources, computer facilities, library and information technology services support, workspace, and any other aspects of supervision distinctive to the field of research,*
- *information provided by the candidate on personal circumstances which may be hindering his/her application to the research,*
- *the supervisor's rating of the candidate's performance – application to the research, research techniques, time management and writing ability,*
- *an acknowledgement provided by the Head of Department that he/she has seen and understood the candidate's and supervisor's comments, together with any additional observation(s) the Head of Department may wish to make.*