

National Review of Doctoral Qualifications

Desktop Evaluation Guidelines

For the attention of Review Panels

**June 2020**

**Background**

As indicated in the *Framework for National Review of Higher Education Programmes* (2015), the review comprises a number of phases.

The first phase is an institutional self-evaluation of its Doctoral qualification(s) measured against the recently developed qualification Standard. This phase is now complete. Institutions have submitted their self-evaluation reports (SERs). The SERs have been subjected to a screening by the Directorate for Standards and National Reviews. The purpose of the screening is simply to ascertain whether or not the SER includes attention to all sections of the SER template issued by the CHE; it does not attempt to assess the merits of the information or data provided. The internal screening reports are made available to review panels.

The second phase is a desktop evaluation of the SER by a review panel. In the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic the desktop evaluation is conducted online. The CHE organises online orientation workshops, followed by online meetings of each panel independently.

**Aims and scope of the desktop evaluation**

The aims of the desktop evaluation are to:

* verify the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the institution’s interpretation of the qualification Standard;
* on the basis of evidence provided in the SER, evaluate claims made by the institution with regards to its meeting the Standard;
* where relevant, identify the need for additional evidence to support institutional claims;
* where applicable, identify areas of above-threshold practice and areas in need of improvement identified by the institution, and any additional areas identified by the panel;
* in respect of matters raised by the institution that need to be addressed in order to meet the standard, assess the feasibility of plans made and timelines proposed;
* where applicable, identify outstanding information or data required of the institution to enable a comprehensive evaluation of the qualification(s). Details of the various ways in which additional information and data may be obtained are included in the Addendum to the Manual for Review.
* Recommendations culminating into a provisional report by the Chairperson of the review panel

**The desktop evaluation process**

You should have already received your username and password (log on details) to enable you to access the Nr-Online system. Please see the guidance on the online system attached.

The desktop evaluation requires careful scrutiny of the institutional SER and supporting data. During this stage, you will be expected to reflect on your approach to the material, develop evidence-based justification for your findings, and complete a report based on the template provided by the CHE. The template provides a structure within which you can record your emerging views against the qualification Standard and develop lines of enquiry. The evaluation template follows closely the format of the SER template issued to the institutions.

The response of the institution to the questions posed in the SER template are preferably in the form of a narrative reporting the findings at an aggregated level (that is, for the institution as a whole), based on the institution’s analysis of its doctoral qualification(s) offered in all fields and disciplines. Where appropriate, some specific examples may be included in the narrative by way of illustration. The self-evaluation should refer to areas in which the institution regards its doctoral qualification(s) as meeting the Standard, as well as areas that may be identified as above-threshold practice, and areas in which improvement is needed. The evaluation is based solely on the SER, together with any supporting documentation submitted.

The desktop evaluation is not intended to replicate an entire review process. To provide elaboration on what is a selective and perhaps limited evidence base, it will be followed by interaction between the panel and the institution. (See ‘Subsequent Proceedings’ below.) For this reason, the aims of the desktop evaluation include:

* identifying requests for additional information or data, or clarification of information included in the SER;
* developing lines of enquiry to be followed during further phases of the review process.

Development of the desktop evaluation report is a collaborative exercise. In preparation for the initial review panel meeting, each panel member is expected to conduct her/his own independent analysis of the SER and supporting evidence provided in the annexures, including any other information provided by the CHE. Independent analysis is followed by a collective identification of general themes, findings, requests for clarification, and lines of enquiry.

The Chairperson plays a coordinating role, and may assign particular tasks to members of the panel so as to ensure equitable distribution of the workload.

At this stage of the process, panels are discouraged from making definitive judgements. The desktop evaluation report is provisional, a precursor to further discussion, interaction with the institution, and following up of lines of enquiry as the process unfolds. The lines of enquiry are indicative of areas to be pursued and may be added to, modified or closed down before the site visit based on further scrutiny, or any additional information provided to the panel.

Where further information or data, or clarification thereof, is required, the CHE will communicate requests to the institution. The Review Panel Chair will compile the key issues identified into a composite document which will be uploaded on the *Nr-Online*. The provisional report forms the basis on which a final report by the panel is completed on conclusion of the process of enquiry.

Once the panel has completed its desktop evaluation report, it is signed off by the Chair. The Chair then uploads the report to *the Nr*- *Online* by the due date.

**Panel member’s contract**

The CHE and the desktop evaluation panel member enter into a contract, which includes a date by which the report needs to be completed. It is accompanied by a confidentiality agreement and a statement by the evaluator confirming no conflict of interest. The evaluator may not, under any circumstances, convey details of the report, or any part of it, in any form, written or oral, to any party other than the CHE.

**Subsequent proceedings**

According to the *Framework for National Review of Higher Education Programmes* (CHE, 2015), the follow-up normally comprises a site visit by the panel to the institution. The current COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown restrictions (the duration of which remains uncertain) have jeopardised the feasibility of normal on-site visits. It is likely that *in situ* contact-mode observation and interview will need to be substituted with online alternatives. The CHE will arrange for a set of online interviews conducted by the panel with various groups within the institution (among them, senior management, academic leaders, supervisors, alumni, students, support staff). The panel may recommend, for specified reasons, interviews with additional parties or individuals within the institution. In the last resort, a physical visit focussing on specific areas of concern may be necessary, made by one or more members of the panel.

Taking this into account, the desktop evaluation report includes a section in which the panel is required to indicate through what mode(s) of communication additional information and clarification would best be obtained. (*Refer to the Desktop Evaluation Report Template)*

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