



**THE HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION**  
**POLICY ON PHD DEGREE PROGRAMS**

Effective January 1, 2021

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## **HIGHER EDUCATION COMMISSION POLICY ON PHD DEGREE PROGRAMS**

### **1. PRINCIPLES AND PURPOSES OF THE HEC'S PHD POLICY**

- 1.1. Doctor of Philosophy (or PhD) is the highest university degree that is awarded in most disciplines. Those who are qualified at this level are expected to serve highly consequential functions in society, including in the fields of teaching and research. With in-depth training and immersion in a particular field of study, which includes making an original contribution to the area of study through the PhD dissertation, those holding PhD degrees are expected to have an expertise in their area of study that they can utilize in teaching and research, as well as in problem solving and innovation for addressing important societal challenges. While other degree programs aim to teach students the things that we (academic community) know, the purpose of a PhD program is to enable students to investigate what we don't know.
- 1.2. PhD is a specialized degree that serves specific purposes, and the Higher Education Commission's (the "HEC") PhD policy is intended to ensure that PhD programs are open to individuals with a passion for and deep interest in academics and research, and who have demonstrated that they are capable of handling the academic rigor required to complete a PhD degree.
- 1.3. Since the PhD is a highly specialized degree, it is intended that only those higher education institutions ("HEIs") that possess resources to offer quality education at the highest level should offer PhD degree programs. The HEC has prescribed standards for launching PhD programs, and universities must obtain the HEC's approval by submitting evidence of compliance with these standards before launching a PhD program.
- 1.4. In view of the highly consequential functions served by PhD degree holders in universities and research institutions, as well as in society generally, one of the most important guiding principles of the HEC's PhD policy is quality. The policy framework assumes that it may be preferable not to confer a PhD degree than to confer a PhD degree on the basis of substandard academic and research work.
- 1.5. The overall goal of the policy framework is that PhD graduates from Pakistani universities should possess expertise in his or her field of study, should be able to conduct high quality research, and should have strong writing skills relevant to his or her field of study.
- 1.6. It is critical to note that the HEC has prescribed minimum standards that every PhD candidate must satisfy before being awarded a degree by universities. Universities are encouraged to formulate their own admissions and completion requirements that would further enhance the quality of their PhD programs, provided such internal policies are consistent with the minimum requirements set forth in the HEC's PhD Policy.
- 1.7. This policy has been made pursuant to the powers granted to the HEC under the Higher Education Commission Ordinance, 2002, and is binding on all HEIs in the country, whether operating in the public or private sectors. Violations or failure to comply with the HEC's

policies may lead to regulatory action being taken against non-compliant HEIs (including, but not limited to, issuance of warnings; direction to stop further admissions; suspension or cancellation of NOCs; issuance of public alerts; and non-recognition of deficient degrees).

- 1.8. The HEC's PhD policy shall be effective as set forth in the timeline in Annex 1.8, in accordance with which this policy shall supersede all previous policies and notifications concerning matters covered in this policy.

## **2. REQUIREMENTS FOR LAUNCHING PHD PROGRAMS AT UNIVERSITIES**

- 2.1. Principles and Purposes. The HEC has prescribed minimum standards for the launching of new PhD programs, and requires universities to provide evidence of compliance with these standards in order to obtain approval from the HEC before starting the PhD program. The purpose of this policy is that only those universities should establish PhD programs that have the resources to impart education at the highest level in the particular discipline.
- 2.2. HEC Approval for Launching PhD Programs. A no objection certificate ("NOC") from the HEC must be obtained by universities prior to the launch of any PhD program (in accordance with the timelines set forth in Annex 2.2).
- 2.3. Minimum Requirements for Launching PhD Programs. In order to obtain an NOC for launching a new PhD program, universities are required to comply with the following requirements:
  - a. The Act/Charter of the university allows for the offering of the program;
  - b. Approval has been granted by the university's statutory body to start the program;
  - c. The university shall not have violated HEC rules, regulations or policies in any material respect in the last two years, provided if the university has adequately and timely taken remedial measures to rectify the violation, the HEC may at its sole discretion grant a waiver in respect of this requirement;
  - d. If applicable, any necessary approvals shall have been obtained by accreditation councils to launch the program;
  - e. The curriculum of the program shall be consistent with any guidelines issued by the HEC;
  - f. The admissions requirements of the new PhD program shall satisfy the HEC's minimum criteria for admission in PhD programs (set forth in Section 3 below);
  - g. The program completion requirements of the new PhD program shall satisfy the HEC's minimum criteria for award of PhD degrees (set forth in Section 4 below);
  - h. At least three (3) full-time faculty members holding PhD degrees in the relevant field shall be appointed to the department that will be offering the new PhD program;
  - i. The intended PhD program shall include a residence requirement for PhD students of at least two years; and
  - j. As a general matter, universities shall establish PhD programs in core disciplines in social sciences, humanities and natural sciences, as may be notified by HEC from time to time. In order to launch PhD degree programs with specialized titles, the university shall submit for the HEC's review a statement of purpose explaining the need and rationale for launching such a program; provided, however, that universities that have been in existence for less than ten (10) years shall only be allowed to launch PhD programs in core disciplines.

- 2.4. Process and Timeline for Obtaining an NOC for the Launch of PhD Programs. The process and timeline for requesting NOCs for the launch of PhD programs shall be as follows:
- a. Universities intending to launch a new PhD program shall submit a duly filled out form for the launch of new PhD programs (Form 2.4(a)) signed by the head of the relevant department who shall certify to the correctness of the information provided and shall ensure that all required documents are attached with the application.
  - b. Universities shall apply for the NOC before launching any new PhD programs, and no admissions shall be advertised unless the NOC has been obtained from the HEC.
  - c. Universities shall be generally be allowed to launch no more than two (2) PhD programs in a single year. Universities intending to launch more than two (2) PhD programs in a year shall be required to submit a report demonstrating their capacity to initiate additional programs, which shall be reviewed by a special committee constituted by the HEC for this purpose.
  - d. Universities requesting NOCs for launching PhD programs in the fall semester shall apply no later than March 31 of the same year.
  - e. Universities requesting NOCs to launch a PhD in the spring semester shall apply no later than September 30 of the previous year.
  - f. The HEC may, at its discretion, require an external review or a zero visit in connection with the launching of PhD programs by a university.
- 2.5. Continuing Compliance with the HEC's Policies. In the event that a university's application for launching a PhD program is successful, the university shall be granted an NOC for starting the PhD program. Upon receiving the NOC from the HEC, the university may launch the program subject to the following conditions:
- a. The university shall ensure that it will continue to comply with the requirements set forth in Section 2.3 during the entire period that it offers the PhD program;
  - b. If an ongoing program fails to meet any of the requirements set forth in Section 2.3, it shall immediately stop further admissions to the program and notify the HEC, including providing information on remedial actions being taken by the university; and
  - c. Faculty members may supervise no more than five (5) PhD students at any time.
- 2.6. Cancellation of NOC. In the event that a PhD program fails to meet the requirements set forth in this policy and the university does not take necessary and proper remedial action, the HEC may cancel the NOC awarded to the university for the noncompliant program. Upon cancellation, the university shall not be permitted to apply for a fresh NOC to restart the program for a period of at least two (2) years.

### **3. MINIMUM CRITERIA FOR ADMISSION IN PHD PROGRAMS**

- 3.1. Principles and Purposes. The minimum requirement for admission for admissions to a PhD program shall be completion of the BS (or equivalent) degree. To avoid confusion, it is clarified that this and the remaining criteria in this section are only the minimum requirements, and universities are free to establish their own admissions framework that may vary by discipline, provided it satisfies the minimum conditions set forth in this section. Keeping in view that doctoral studies are intended to be rigorous and demanding, universities need to ensure that entrants to doctoral programs are capable of handling the academic rigor required to complete a PhD degree. Further, in admitting students to PhD programs, this policy encourages admissions committees to take a substantive approach to ascertain (a) applicants' commitment (or level of interest) in pursuing the PhD program and (b) their preparedness in terms of previous academic training that will enable them to succeed in the program.
- 3.2. Completion of Prior Degree. Prior to entry into a PhD program, the student shall have been awarded his or her BS/MS/MPhil or equivalent degrees.
- 3.3. Prior Degree in Different Discipline. Consistent with best practices internationally (including leading global universities), it shall generally not be a requirement for admission to a PhD program that the applicant shall have completed a prior degree in the same discipline. If the applicant has a strong interest in pursuing a PhD degree in a different discipline and, in accordance with the department's policy, the admissions committee is satisfied that the applicant's prior education has sufficiently prepared him or her to undertake the course of studies of the doctoral program (or, in the opinion of the admissions committee, the preparation can be deemed satisfactory by taking a few additional courses after starting the program), the applicant shall be considered for admissions notwithstanding their prior qualification in a different discipline.
- 3.4. Minimum GPA Requirement. For admission in PhD programs, a minimum CGPA of 3.0 (out of 4.0 in the semester system) or First Division (in the annual system) in the most recent degree obtained is required, whether such was degree obtained from Pakistani or foreign universities.
- 3.5. Testing Requirement. Applicants to PhD programs shall be required to fulfill the following testing requirements:
- a. All applicants to PhD programs shall be required to take one of the following non-subject specific admissions test:
    - i. The Graduate Record Examination (GRE) test administered by the Education Testing Service;
    - ii. A graduate admission test administered by the Education Testing Council; or
    - iii. With the permission of the HEC, an equivalent test developed by the university, or by another university, for admissions to graduate programs.
  - b. Subject tests shall not be required for admission to most PhD programs, with the possible exception of certain science disciplines, at the discretion of the university.
- 3.6. Statement of Purpose. As part of the application for admission to PhD programs, applicants shall be required to submit a statement of purpose, which shall form an integral part of the application. The admissions committee shall use the information provided to ascertain the

preparedness and interest of the candidate in pursuing doctoral studies, and whether the department has the requisite resources to train and supervise the doctoral candidate in the subspecialty he or she is interested in.

- 3.7. Discontinuation of Certain Programs Leading to PhD. MS/MPhil leading to PhD programs have been discontinued by the HEC, and as previously notified, no further admissions are allowed in such programs.

#### **4. MINIMUM REQUIREMENTS FOR AWARD OF PHD DEGREES**

- 4.1. Principles and Purposes. The HEC has prescribed minimum criteria for the award of PhD Degrees. The purpose of this policy is to ensure that those who have been certified to have received the highest level of education in a particular field, and will perform consequential functions in society as teachers, researchers or experts, have truly invested their time and effort in developing a thorough understanding of that field of study. For the avoidance of doubt, the criteria in this section provides only the minimum requirements for completion, and universities are free to establish their own framework for the award of PhD degrees that may vary by discipline, provided it satisfies the minimum conditions set forth in this section.
- 4.2. Coursework and Residency Requirement. The following requirements shall be fulfilled before the award of a PhD Degree:
- a) The student shall complete coursework of at least 48 credit hours of which the majority shall be fulfilled through regular classes.
  - b) In case of those students who have previously completed a graduate degree in the same discipline (MS/MPhil or equivalent), the university shall notify a policy (which may vary by discipline) with objective criteria allowing such students to receive credit for prior coursework for not more than 50% of the total credit requirement of the program.
  - c) There shall be a residency requirement for a period of at least two years.
- 4.3. Comprehensive Examination. Following the completion of coursework, every PhD student shall be required to pass a comprehensive examination in order to be granted candidacy as PhD researcher; provided that if the student fails to pass the comprehensive test, he or she shall be allowed one more attempt to take the test.
- 4.4. Doctoral Dissertation. Each PhD researcher shall be required to write a doctoral dissertation that meets the following minimum criteria:
- a) The PhD dissertation shall be supervised by a faculty member who holds a PhD (or equivalent) degree and is an HEC approved supervisor. At the time of appointment as supervisor, the faculty member shall be a full-time faculty member of the university in which the student is enrolled.
  - b) In addition to the PhD committee members, the PhD dissertation must be evaluated by at least two external experts who may be either (i) Pakistan-based Distinguished National Professors, Meritorious Professors, or Tenure Track Professors, or (ii) PhD experts from academically advanced countries (approved list of academically advanced countries for evaluation of PhD Dissertation is provided in Annex 4.4(b)); *provided, however*, that if the PhD candidate publishes his or her dissertation research in a peer reviewed journal that is classified by the HEC as category X or above, the PhD dissertation will only require evaluation by one external expert.

- c) A plagiarism test in accordance with the HEC's Plagiarism Policy must be conducted on the dissertation before its submission to the external experts.
  - d) An open defense of the dissertation is required after positive evaluation of the dissertation by the committee members.
- 4.5. Research Publication. Each PhD researcher shall be required to publish at least one research paper as its first author during his or her doctoral studies in an HEC approved Y category (or above) journal for the award of PhD degree.
- 4.6. Reporting Requirements. The following documents shall be submitted to the HEC following the completion of studies:
- a) A duly filled completion form shall be sent to the HEC from the Office of the Controller of Examinations of the university notifying the HEC that the PhD scholar has completed all the requirements for the award of the PhD degree (see Form 4.6(a)).
  - b) A copy of PhD Dissertation for including in PhD Country Directory and for attestation of the PhD degree by the HEC.
  - c) A duly filled Proforma for the PhD Country Directory, signed by the Principal Supervisor, Controller of Examination and the Vice Chancellor (or Rector) (see Form 4.6(c)).
- 4.7. Degree Completion Timeline. The PhD degree shall be awarded by universities after a minimum of three (3) years and not more than eight (8) years after the enrolment of the student; provided that for students who are unable to complete the program within eight (8) years, the university may designate a competent authority to determine whether the delay was caused by circumstances beyond the student's control, and if so, grant an extension in such exceptional circumstances; provided further that in no event shall the PhD degree be awarded more than ten (10) years after the enrolment of the student in the program. The date of notification of the award of the PhD degree subsequent to the PhD defense shall be considered to be the date of the completion of PhD studies.
- 4.8. Award of MS/MPhil Degrees on the Basis of PhD Studies. If a student successfully completes the full set of requirements for the award of an MS/MPhil (or equivalent) degree during the course of their PhD studies, the university may award the applicable degree to such students upon completion of the relevant requirements.



## Annex 1.8

### Applicability of the Revised HEC's PhD Policy

1. This policy shall be effective from January 1, 2021 (the "Effective Date"). Subject to paragraph 4 of this Annex 1.8, any additional requirements in this policy in comparison with the HEC's previously applicable policy on PhD programs shall apply from the Effective Date, and shall not be retroactively applicable.
2. For the purposes of assessing whether the graduating student is compliant with the HEC's policies, the HEC shall generally consider the HEC policy applicable on the date of the enrollment of the student in the PhD program.
3. For the avoidance of doubt, the following requirements have been added in the revised policy, and shall not be applied retroactively; *provided, however*, that in each case, any previous HEC policy effective before the Effective Date (including those set forth below) shall continue to apply:

Section	Applicable on and after the Effective Date	Applicable Before Effective Date
2.3(i)	Residence requirement	N/A
2.3(j)	Restriction on starting specialized PhD programs for universities that have been in existence for less than ten (10) years	N/A
2.4(c)	Restriction on launching more than two (2) PhD programs in a single year	N/A
3.2	Minimum requirement for admission to PhD programs	All one-year Master degree holders after 16-year schooling are eligible to continue and get direct admission in Ph.D. degree programs in the relevant field offered by the Pakistani universities subject to the following conditions: a) Master's degree was awarded by the HEC-recognized universities/DAI after completion of minimum of 30 credit hours (including 24 credit hours graduate-level course and 6 credit hours of thesis-related work) completed in 12-month study in the relevant field and also granted equivalence by the HEC. b) Master's degree was awarded by chartered foreign universities and the HEC has granted equivalence to this effect.

		c) Deficiencies courses, if any, of the studies may be determined by the admitting Universities.
3.5	Revised testing requirements	For the students admitted after May 30, 2014 (but before the Effective Date), the HEC had recommended to the Universities to: a) Enter into private arrangement under the University Law with the NTS for conducting GAT General/Subject as an eligibility condition for admission to PhD programs, or b) Engage another renowned testing service provider for the purpose, or c) Conduct the test of the equivalent level at the University.
3.6.	Requirement to submit a statement of purpose as part of the application for admission	N/A
4.2.	Revised coursework requirements	Coursework of 18 credit hours (preferably in the first year) required to be completed.

4. Notwithstanding the foregoing, the university and currently enrolled students may take advantage of the following revisions in the policy, even if the student had enrolled before the Effective Date:

Section	Requirement
4.4(b)	Revised external evaluation policy
4.5	Research publication requirement
4.7	Time period for degree completion

## **Annex 2.2**

### **Timelines for Obtaining NOCs for PhD Programs in Pakistan**

#### **A. PhD Programs Launched Prior to November 7, 2013**

For any PhD programs launched before November 7, 2013, universities shall be required to ensure compliance by December 31, 2021. Universities shall submit a comprehensive report of all such ongoing programs to the Quality Assurance Division ("QAD") of the HEC by the aforementioned date. While degrees awarded to graduates of such programs will continue to be recognized until December 31, 2021, degrees awarded after this date will only be recognized if the program has reported compliance of the programs with HEC's policies to the QAD.

#### **B. PhD Programs Launched After November 7, 2013**

Any PhD program started after November 7, 2013 without getting an NOC from the HEC shall not be recognized and degrees awarded by such programs shall not be attested by the HEC. In accordance with HEC's Notification No. 15-54/A&C/2019/HEC/1887, dated October 19, 2020, universities shall have until December 31, 2020 to obtain NOCs for such programs.

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#### Annex 4.4(a)

### List of Technologically/Academically Advanced Countries for Evaluation of the PhD Dissertation

(For all subjects unless noted otherwise)

1	Afghanistan <sup>1&amp;7</sup>	25	Japan
2	Australia	26	Luxemburg
3	Austria	27	Malaysia
4	Belgium	28	Netherland
5	Brunei <sup>2</sup>	29	New Zealand
6	Bulgaria	30	Nigeria <sup>2</sup>
7	Canada	31	Norway
8	China <sup>3</sup>	32	Oman <sup>7</sup>
9	Croatia <sup>4</sup>	33	Poland
10	Czech Republic	34	Portugal
11	Denmark	35	Romania
12	Estonia <sup>4</sup>	36	Russia
13	Finland	37	Singapore
14	France	38	Slovak Republic <sup>4</sup>
15	Germany	39	Slovenia <sup>4</sup>
16	Georgia <sup>4</sup>	40	South Africa
17	Greece	41	South Korea
18	Hong Kong	42	Spain
19	Hungry	43	Sweden
20	Iceland	44	Switzerland
21	India <sup>2&amp;5</sup>	45	Turkey
22	Iran <sup>6&amp;7</sup>	46	United Kingdom
23	Ireland	47	United States
24	Italy	48	All Arab Countries <sup>2</sup>

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- 1- Pashto
  - 2- Arabic, Islamiyat and Islamic Studies
  - 3- Sciences, Engineering & Technology
  - 4- Mathematics Only
  - 5- Brahvi, Punjabi, Saraiki, Sindhi and Urdu
  - 6- Persian
  - 7- Balochi