



ITL Resource No. 7

Postgraduate Research and Supervision

Each of the seven Improving Teaching & Learning Resources can be read and used individually, although there are cross-references as some are closely related. However, it is important to read the Introduction, as it deals with the purpose of the Resources and how they relate to the Higher Education Quality Committee's quality assurance mandate and its quality promotion and capacity development activities.

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FOREWORD

The Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) prioritised quality issues in teaching and learning very early on in the development of its quality assurance systems. Mandated by legislation to conduct institutional audits and programme accreditation and to promote quality and quality assurance, the HEQC initiated a project in 2002 aimed at the improvement of teaching and learning in higher education.

The project on teaching and learning was intended to refocus attention on one of the core functions of higher education in an environment where the restructuring of higher education had given much attention to issues such as governance, financing and the 'size and shape' of the system. The project also reflected the importance of quality-related capacity development in the work of the HEQC, especially in a context where historical disadvantage impacts on the capacities of academic staff to plan and deliver good quality programmes and on the capacities of students to benefit from them. These issues needed to be addressed and to be brought to the centre of the debate about the purposes of a new quality assurance system for South Africa. Moreover, the project fitted in with international debates and developments in higher education, which were prioritising the learning experiences of students as well as giving increased attention to the professionalisation of higher education teaching and to staff development and support.

The HEQC set up the project in a way that would involve a number of role-players. It was important to draw on teaching and learning expertise in higher education as well as maximise the impact of those involved within higher education institutions. The Resources for the Improvement of Teaching and Learning should be seen therefore as the fruit of an extensive collaboration between the HEQC, a large number of experts and practitioners and a range of public and private higher education institutions.

It is hoped that the Resources will be adapted creatively for a number of purposes and used by higher education practitioners individually and in teams in the process of improving the quality of teaching and learning. Improvements in teaching and learning are essential to give effect to the transformation objectives in the restructuring of higher education, especially in relation to redress and equity and to the responsiveness of higher education to national goals and challenges.

The HEQC looks forward to further cooperation with key partners in higher education in effectively developing and using the Resources. We would like to acknowledge that funding for the project and this publication was made available by DFID and the Carnegie Corporation.

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Executive Director
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The Improving Teaching and Learning (ITL) Resources are the product of collaboration between the HEQC and a wide range of academics based in private and public higher education institutions (HEIs). These included several academics from other countries who assisted with the project or provided advice. The 14 regional workshops at which the draft Resources were introduced and discussed in 2003 were generously hosted by public HEIs.

FOCUS AREA

This ITL Resource on *Postgraduate Research & Supervision* deals in some detail with the support and oversight of postgraduate research. The Resource is therefore particularly applicable to research-intensive institutions that have a strong research focus specified in their missions. This Resource will complement the HEQC's *Quality Management of Research* (forthcoming in 2005). The good practice described in this Resource may not be of direct relevance to those institutions (particularly in the private sector) that do not offer postgraduate research degrees. However, in its *Criteria for Institutional Audits*, the HEQC states that:

Although not all higher education institutions have research as a defining aspect of their mission, it is assumed that some measure of research activity is underway at all higher education institutions (e.g. research undertaken to inform teaching, and research by postgraduate students). (2004a: 16)

Thus, in its institutional audits, the HEQC will expect to find at least a research policy and plans to support and develop research capacity among staff in non-research-focused institutions. Furthermore, Criterion No. 15, which applies to all institutions, requires that 'Effective arrangements are in place for the quality assurance, development and monitoring of research functions and postgraduate education'. In Criteria Nos. 16 and 17 the requirements for the quality management of research and postgraduate supervision are elaborated further. These criteria apply only to those institutions with a research focus and postgraduate students.

The HEQC, in Criterion 9 of its *Criteria for Programme Accreditation* (2004b: 14-15), sets out specific minimum requirements for postgraduate research in respect of policies, procedures and regulations. For example, it states that a minimum requirement is that, 'The selection and appointment criteria in place for postgraduate supervisors are acceptable to the research community in the area of study', and further details of what is required in this respect are given. The other criteria apply to all levels of higher education (HE), and the expert peer evaluating a postgraduate programme will check if appropriate requirements are in place for aspects such as staffing, infrastructure and student support and development.

This Resource applies to all research programmes at public and private HEIs, e.g. Master's by full thesis and Doctoral studies, and also to the research components of taught Master's and Doctoral programmes. This Resource has implications for policy development, and

the establishment of structures for research implementation and monitoring, and is applicable to institutional, faculty, departmental and postgraduate programme levels. At the institutional level, the Resource relates to institutional policy and planning to assure the quality of postgraduate qualifications and to regulate and improve procedures for research supervision. At the institutional level, the Resource also relates to the promotion of a research culture in which a research infrastructure and environment are provided and the conditions created for developing research capacity in both staff and students. At the programme level, the Resource relates to specific postgraduate research programmes, whose quality depends on the professionalism of individual supervisors, on the quality of the students, and on the more specific research capacity, facilities, regulations and procedures provided by faculties, schools or departments.

The HEQC *Criteria for Institutional Audits* (2004a: 5) includes the following open-ended questions relating, directly and indirectly, to research and postgraduate supervision:

- What are the unique and distinctive ways in which the institution enriches and adds excellence to the HE sector and society – nationally, regionally and internationally?
- What does the institution do to produce a vibrant intellectual culture within the institution and in society at large?
- In what ways does the institution act as an incubator of new ideas and cutting-edge knowledge and technologies within the national system of innovation?
- What are some of the notable examples in the last three years of institutional success in promoting and enhancing quality?

The term ‘postgraduate supervision’ usually refers to the supervision or promotion of students’ research activities leading in whole or in part to the awarding of a Master’s or Doctoral degree. The goals of postgraduate supervision are both the production of a good thesis and the transformation of the student into a competent and independent researcher. The supervision process is essentially a complex teaching and mentoring activity that includes a range of activities, such as:

- Assisting students to define a research topic and design an acceptable research proposal;
- Getting the proposal approved;
- Providing guidance on appropriate literature;
- Assisting with the determination of the research design and methodology;
- Supporting students in the collecting and analysing of data and writing up the thesis or dissertation as a final product;
- Providing detailed feedback to students;
- Meeting reporting requirements on students’ progress; and
- Writing a final report on the research process for the external examiners and examining committee.

At the institutional or faculty levels postgraduate students also require support to access funding for their research, and guidance on how to make their research results public.

RATIONALE

In its *National Plan for Higher Education* (Ministry of Education, 2001),¹ the Department of Education (DoE) suggests that the 'value and importance of research cannot be over-emphasised. Research ... is perhaps the most powerful vehicle that we have to deepen our democracy' (2001: 5.1: 71). The *Education White Paper 3* (DoE, 1997)² places strong emphasis on the need to develop research capacity and output – to ensure both open-ended intellectual enquiry and the application of research activities to technical improvement and social development. Despite the NPHE and the White Paper, however, the current capacity, distribution, outcomes and throughput rates of the public HE research system remain cause for concern.

In the NPHE, the Department calls into question the ability of the HE system to meet the research and development agenda of the country (2001: 5.1: 72). In support of this contention, the following statistics are quoted in the NPHE:

- In recent years there has been a 10% decline in total published research outputs;
- There has also been a decline in the South African share of world research output;
- Only six universities are responsible for 65% of research outputs and for 70% of all Master's and Doctoral graduates in the system;
- Master's and Doctoral enrolments as a proportion of total enrolments are far too low – 5.0% in 1995 and 5.7% in 1999; and
- Black students constitute only 30% of all Master's and Doctoral enrolments and women only 40%.

The DoE has set an increase in postgraduate enrolments and outputs as a strategic goal for the South African HE system. In 2001 the DoE suggested that in the subsequent five years the system should improve the efficiency of its postgraduate outputs so that Master's graduates constitute 6% of the annual output of graduates and Doctoral graduates constitute 1% (2001: 5.3: 76). The DoE aims to steer the system to improve its research outputs through the following mechanisms:

- The New Funding Framework (2002a) introduces a separate research component based on research outputs, i.e. Master's and Doctoral graduates and research publications.
- The DoE will provide earmarked funding to build research capacity and for postgraduate training in historically disadvantaged universities (HDUs) and universities of technology (former technikons) and for the facilitation of inter-institutional research collaboration.
- The DoE will consider providing postgraduate scholarships to students from under-represented groups, and for subsidy purposes it will treat foreign postgraduate students as South African students.
- In the NPHE, the DoE also calls on the HEQC to make the evaluation of postgraduate programmes a priority³ (2001: 5.3: 77).

¹ Hereafter: NPHE (2001).

² Hereafter: White Paper (1997)

³ This was one of the reasons the first national review conducted by the HEQC was of the Master's in Business Administration (MBA); a report on the MBA review was published in 2004.

Traditionally, postgraduate supervision is not an area that has been systematically quality assured. The process has usually been left to the trusted professionalism of the individual supervisor, with minimal guidance and 'interference' from the institution. Given this context, the HEQC has identified the quality assurance (QA) of postgraduate research programmes as an important concern in its focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning, particularly for those institutions that specify postgraduate research in their institutional mission. The HEQC employs an additional set of institutional audit criteria for institutions with a research focus.

DISCUSSION

For practitioners to be reflective, scholarly and innovative, they need to engage in robust debates that are theoretically informed. **Kathy Luckett**, the coordinator of the working group, was asked to write this section so as to reflect on issues discussed by the working group in the course of developing the first draft of the Resources.

The views and ideas put forward in the following discussion do not necessarily reflect the policies, views or practices of the HEQC.

Those institutions that plan to increase their postgraduate enrolments and outputs will need first to create the institutional conditions for this to occur: for example, guidelines and policies for developing and evaluating research proposals; the provision of research funding; incentives for research outputs; staff training and development; the development of research support networks; and generally developing a research-conducive infrastructure and culture. This applies to private HEIs that offer postgraduate programmes. Pressure will also be particularly acute for those HDUs and universities of technology (former technikons) that currently lack appropriately qualified staff and appropriate research infrastructure and so fail to attract postgraduate students. Likewise, merging institutions will need to attend to the development of a common research infrastructure and culture across the new institution. However, even those institutions that are perceived to be strong research institutions could benefit from a review of the quality of their postgraduate research and supervision practices. A common problem, for example, is the lack of systematic attention paid to the development of basic research knowledge and skills in undergraduate and Honours programmes. This is short-sighted, favouring as it does advantaged students and impacting negatively on equity and redress.

Postgraduate supervision and research training are core academic activities for most HEIs worldwide and are distinctive in that they provide the link between teaching and learning and research. Traditional approaches to postgraduate supervision are characterised by isolated, intense and sometimes intimate personal relationships. Such approaches are based on an apprenticeship model that often sets up a dependency relationship between student and supervisor, and on unequal power relations that are easily abused. Traditionally, this model of supervision has allowed informal and idiosyncratic approaches by the supervisor

and required enormous commitment from the student. This model is often characterised by slow throughput rates, unaccountable behaviour by supervisors, disputes between students and supervisors, and a general lack of clarity on procedures and regulations for the supervision process. In the South African context the traditional apprenticeship model carries with it additional historical and political ‘baggage’; namely, that the supervisory role has been dominated by white male supervisors and is often perceived to have been characterised by exclusive and elitist practices.

Recent shifts in knowledge production towards more applied research, a greater emphasis on employability, the increasing prevalence of qualification inflation, greater numbers and diversity of students, and pressure on HEIs to produce more postgraduates in less time, have meant that the traditional practice of research supervision is under pressure. Its nature is changing and being replaced by more pragmatic and efficient approaches, based on explicit accountability and contractual requirements for parties, an emphasis on research skills training and an emphasis on the employability of the graduate. The shift to a more formal, contractual and accountable relationship has the advantage of protecting both staff and students from negative perceptions and from the possibility of exploitative relationships. However, we believe that it is important to preserve, as far as possible, the intense one-on-one supervisory relationship, while avoiding the dangers of isolation and exploitation; this can be achieved by creating communities of research practice within departments, into which novice researchers can be inducted and which serve to ‘dilute’ the supervisory relationship and monitor the supervision process.

EVALUATIVE QUESTIONS

The following questions may be adapted for use in self-evaluating the quality of postgraduate supervision and research training:

1. Do the institutional mission and strategic plan emphasise research and postgraduate niche areas? If so, how is this aspect of the institutional mission realised through its planning and resource allocation procedures?
2. How are postgraduate studies and supervision managed and quality assured at the institution?
3. Does the institution have clear policies, regulations and procedures for each stage of the postgraduate research process? How does the institution ensure accountability for the implementation of these policies and regulations?
4. To what extent are guidelines, acceptable to the local research community, communicated to postgraduate students on their rights and responsibilities with respect to the supervision of their research?
5. How does the institution/ faculty/ school/ department provide a research-conducive infrastructure and environment for its postgraduate students?
6. How does the institution provide appropriate induction to research and research skills training and support for postgraduate students, particularly for underprepared students?
7. How does the institution provide access to funding opportunities for postgraduate students?
8. To what extent are guidelines and criteria, acceptable to the local research community, provided for the selection and appointment of postgraduate supervisors? How does the institution provide guidance and staff development for postgraduate supervisors?
9. To what extent are guidelines and criteria, acceptable to the local research community, provided for the appointment of internal and external examiners and for the examining process?
10. How does the institution regularly monitor and review its postgraduate provision, completion rates, outputs and the employability of its graduates? Does this quality management system include eliciting student feedback on supervision, and the review of postgraduate policies and procedures?

EVALUATIVE QUESTIONS AND SUGGESTED GOOD PRACTICE DESCRIPTORS

Evaluative Question 1: Realisation of the institutional mission through planning & resource allocation

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

Mission statements and strategic plans relating to postgraduate research have been operationalised; e.g. as faculty plans.

Postgraduate enrolment and output targets are clearly stated.

Recruitment and admissions procedures for postgraduate studies are aligned with these plans and targets.

Postgraduate research plans are supported by business plans and/or research funding.

Evaluative Question 2: Effective management of the postgraduate system

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

The institution has developed clearly defined policies and procedures for:

- The recruitment, admission and induction of postgraduate students;
- The approval of research proposals;
- The supervisory relationship;
- The appointment of supervisors and examiners;
- Thesis presentation and examination;
- The award of degrees;
- Student complaints and appeals; and
- Postgraduate publications.

The institution's postgraduate research policy is supported by financial, administrative and organisational support and staff development.

Lines of accountability for the supervision process are clear. A senior academic/ line manager is assigned responsibility per faculty/ school/ department to coordinate research degrees, monitor the progress of postgraduate students and oversee assessment procedures. For taught Master's degrees the same person ensures that coursework and research are properly coordinated. Supervisors are required to document and report regularly to a senior manager on the supervision process.

Monitoring and review of this system takes place regularly and includes student feedback.

Evaluative Question 3: Postgraduate policies & procedures

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

The institution has developed postgraduate policies, regulations and procedures that are in keeping with its general research policy.

Postgraduate policies and regulations are widely disseminated, understood by students, administrative and academic staff and implemented consistently across the institution.

Admissions

Admissions procedures are clear, consistently applied and aligned with the *Higher Education Qualifications Framework*, or HEQF.⁴ As far as possible, decisions about admissions are linked to funding opportunities for the students concerned. Regular selection criteria ensure that students admitted to particular research programmes are adequately prepared to undertake the required research. Equity and access concerns are responsibly built into selection criteria and protocols; for example, if students do not meet regular admissions requirements, flexible entry routes could be provided through the recognition of prior learning (RPL), or alternative assessment protocols, which could include interviews, presentations, references, portfolios of previous work etc. Where the institution/ faculty does admit students via alternative/ flexible admissions procedures, provision is made for additional research training, language and writing skills development and support, both prior to and during the research process.

Approval of research projects

Training for research proposal development is provided for students. Criteria for the approval of research projects include consideration of the following issues: the suitability of the project for the award in terms of the research questions and conceptualisation of the research; suitability of methodology; and analysis and scientific integrity of the proposed research. Further considerations include evidence that the student has the required research competences to complete the project; evidence that a suitable supervisor is available; and the availability of facilities and resources for the completion of the project.

Student complaints and appeals

Open, fair and formal procedures are in place for hearing and adjudicating student complaints about the quality of the institution's supervision and support provision and for appeals against assessment decisions; these are clearly communicated to students. Students have the right of reasonable access to their records.

Evaluative Question 4: Rights & responsibilities of postgraduate students

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

The rights and responsibilities of postgraduate research students are clearly communicated to them, ideally in the form of a supervision/ learning contract. This includes: specifying students' responsibilities for registration; the payment of fees; communicating with and setting up appointments with supervisors; the nature and frequency of contact with the supervisor; attendance at meetings, seminars etc.; progress reports and monitoring of progress; submission of written work; meeting of deadlines; and meeting examination requirements and degree regulations.

The expectations of students with respect to observing research ethics, codes of conduct, regulations on plagiarism, copyright and intellectual property rules, rules for publication,

⁴ Note that *The Higher Qualifications Framework: Draft for Discussion* (Ministry of Education: 2004), which replaced the New Academic Policy, or NAP (DoE, 2002), had not yet been finalised at the time of publishing these Resources.

sponsors' conditions, teaching assistant duties, and health and safety procedures are also made explicit.

Evaluative Question 5: Provision of a research-conducive infrastructure & environment

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

The institution provides a research-conducive infrastructure and environment for its postgraduate students. For example, students are inducted into an active research community, and provided with a suitably skilled and knowledgeable supervisor and/or supervisory committee. Adequate research facilities and equipment are provided, such as computing and information technology (IT) facilities, library facilities, study and laboratory space and technical equipment and accommodation. Optimal access to these facilities is available.

Postgraduate students have access to other academics in their specialisation, visiting researchers and other experts. The students also have access to financial support for conference attendance and publication.

The HEI provides its students with opportunities for communicating and meeting with other students; presenting and receiving feedback on work in progress; effective student representation; and establishing postgraduate student associations.

Evaluative Question 6: Research skills training & student support

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

The institution seeks to build student research capacity, particularly for underprepared students, through a range of support activities such as: an orientation/ induction programme; research design and methods training; research skills training; language and writing skills development; editorial support for writing; the development of research and professional skills (such as project management, information retrieval and database management); a mentoring system; and the provision of guidance and counselling in the event of difficulties.

Postgraduate students have access to appropriate student support and development facilities such as counselling, healthcare, and social and recreational facilities.

Evaluative Question 7: Funding opportunities

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

The institution effectively disseminates information on funding opportunities for postgraduate students, and provides support for accessing these opportunities. As far as possible, access to funding for operational expenses required for completing research projects is made available to postgraduate students through faculty/ departmental budgets. This could include: funding for library searches; photocopying; conferences; travel for fieldwork or experimental work; visits to other research teams or laboratories etc.

Postgraduate scholarships and grants are available to meritorious students.

Funding incentives are available for postgraduate students from designated groups. Fee reductions or remission of fees are granted to staff engaged in doctoral studies.

Evaluative Question 8: Selection & appointment & guidance for supervisors

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

The selection and appointment criteria for postgraduate supervisors are acceptable to the local research community and are strictly applied. Selection criteria include relevant qualifications, experience, expertise, peer recognition, research track record and publications.

There are guidelines for other considerations such as supervisor workloads, alternative arrangements if supervisors are to be absent for an extended period, co-supervision, transfer arrangements, reporting and advice routes for both students and supervisors if communication breaks down or if there are concerns about a student's ability to cope, and mechanisms for deciding to suspend or terminate a student's registration. Where feasible, students have access to a postgraduate committee (which includes the supervisor) in order to get wider feedback and support for their research.

The institution provides a framework for arranging supervisor-student interactions in terms of explicit roles and responsibilities, expectations regarding frequency of meetings, supervisor reporting and feedback responsibilities, and turnaround times and responsibilities with respect to assessment arrangements.

Support for supervisors includes an induction/ orientation to institutional policies on research, the management of postgraduate supervision and the role and responsibilities of supervisors in the research process. Guidelines such as a format for establishing agreements or learning contracts between postgraduate students and supervisors are provided.

Staff development such as in-service training, mentoring and peer support is available for novice supervisors.

The institution also rewards supervisors for the graduation of postgraduate students.

Evaluative Question 9: The assessment of postgraduate research

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

Assessment criteria and/or an explicit understanding of the quality of research achievement required, plus thesis production, length, referencing and layout requirements, are clearly communicated to students on commencement of their studies, by means of an institutional or faculty guide/ handbook.

Internal and external examiners are appointed according to acceptable criteria; for example, at least one examiner external to the institution is appointed per dissertation/ thesis. Examiners are appointed on the basis of qualifications, experience, expert knowledge in the research area and independence.

The institution provides clear guidelines to external examiners on the standard/ quality of research achievement required, on the nature of their task and on institutional examining regulations. The requirements for examination reports are clearly documented for examiners. External examiners usually report directly to the Senate (or its sub-committees), or equivalent, of the institution.

There are clear guidelines on how assessment outcomes, corrections and further work are communicated to students and monitored by their supervisors. Without undermining the principle of assessment by academic judgment, assessment decisions are made transparently and students are afforded reasonable access to information (e.g. examiners' identities and reports). There are appeal mechanisms for students and opportunities for them to defend their theses, e.g. through an oral defence.

Higher degree committees or similar structures consider examiners' reports qualitatively and make considered decisions about examination outcomes.

On completion of their research, students are encouraged and guided by their supervisors on how to publish their findings in suitable journals.

Evaluative Question 10: Monitoring & review of postgraduate research

Suggested Good Practice Descriptors

The institutional QA system ensures that the processes and outcomes of postgraduate research programmes are monitored and reviewed regularly, usually at programme and/or school/ faculty level. Reviews are based on: data gathered from postgraduate student feedback on the quality of their learning experience; supervision and support infrastructure; examiners' reports; and supervisor and research coordinators' self-reviews and reports. Other sources of data could be feedback from external funders and employer/ graduate surveys.

The institution runs a central research information system, which captures and monitors overall completion times, graduation rates and postgraduate research outputs.

Review results are fed into future planning cycles.

SUGGESTED SOURCES OF DATA FOR SELF-EVALUATION AND REVIEW

These suggestions are not intended to be used as a checklist. They are offered rather to assist and guide HEIs on what may be appropriate sources of data. This list will obviously need to be adjusted depending on the nature and context of the institution and/or programme under consideration.

INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL

1. Institutional mission statement;
2. Institutional three-year rolling plan, and 'programme and qualification mix' or PQM (in the case of public HEIs);
3. Documentation on postgraduate policies and procedures;
4. Organogram of the postgraduate decision-making and accountability structures at the institutional/ faculty/ departmental levels;
5. Documentation on admission requirements for postgraduate students;
6. Documentation on staff development programmes for postgraduate supervisors;
7. Guideline documentation for supervisors;
8. Guideline documentation for examiners;
9. Guideline documentation for postgraduate students;
10. Documentation regarding postgraduate student support facilities and available research infrastructure;
11. Documentation regarding funding available for postgraduates;
12. Documentation regarding progress made towards reaching equity targets in postgraduate enrolments and outputs; and
13. Research reports relating to postgraduate studies (e.g. completion and throughput rates).

PROGRAMME LEVEL

1. List of postgraduate supervisors (and co-supervisors), their *curriculum vitae* (CVs), the topics they are supervising and their students;
2. Samples of postgraduate supervision contracts or agreements;
3. Samples of supervisors' reports on the supervision process;
4. List of internal and external examiners and their CVs;
5. Samples of external examiners' reports;
6. Postgraduate student opinion data; and
7. Graduate or employer surveys where available.

ABBREVIATIONS & ACRONYMS

CHE	Council on Higher Education
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DoE	Department of Education
HDU	Historically Disadvantaged University
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
HEQF	Higher Education Qualifications Framework
IT	Information Technology
ITL	Improving Teaching & Learning
MBA	Master's in Business Administration
NAP	New Academic Policy
NPHE	National Plan for Higher Education
PQM	Programme and Qualification Mix
QA	Quality Assurance
RPL	Recognition of Prior Learning

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

postgraduate supervision refers to the supervision or promotion of students' research activities; typically leading in whole or in part to the awarding of a Master's or Doctoral degree.

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