

Postgraduate Committee consultation on proposed revisions to Higher Doctorate degrees

Consultation

1. The Postgraduate Committee is consulting on potential revisions to Higher Doctorate degrees and the degree of Bachelor of Divinity (BD), in response to representations from several Degree Committees to review and potentially withdraw the degrees for new applicants.

The consultation relates to Higher Doctorate degrees awarded through assessment of published research. No changes are proposed to the conferral of Higher Doctorates as titular honorary degrees.

2. The consultation is open from 23 April until 2 June 2025. Please use the online form to respond:
https://cambridge.eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_aYuLDdT12qLuimq.
3. Responses are invited from Degree Committees. A single response per Committee that best represents the views of its members is please requested. Feedback collected during the consultation will inform the final proposal.

Proposals

4. Respondents are invited to indicate support for one of three proposed options for future applications for Higher Doctorate degrees:
 - A. Retain current eligibility criteria but **increase the application fee** from £582 to £1,830, to better reflect time and effort involved in administering the degree.
 - B. Retain current application fee (£582) but **revise the eligibility criteria to limit candidature to current or recently retired staff**, in recognition of academic eminence within the institution. Applications would be limited to individuals:
 - of not less than eight years' standing from admission to their first degree of this or another University; and
 - who are either admitted to some office in the University or a Headship or Fellowship of a College, with at least five years continuous service at the time of application, or who retired within the last five years from some office in the University or a Headship or Fellowship of a College, with at least five years continuous service at the date of retirement.
 - C. **Withdraw Higher Doctorate degrees** to any new applicants.

5. Feedback is also invited on potential changes to the application and award process, should admission to Higher Doctorate Degrees continue, to:
 - a. expand the applicant's summary from 500 words to 2,000-3,000 words and require clear articulation of their claim to the degree, to aid the Referees.
 - b. require inclusion of a CV with the application, for consideration at the *prima facie* stage only, to aid the initial Assessor.
 - c. introduce a limit on the volume of published work submitted, to reduce the burden on Referees.
 - d. introduce a minimum five-year period before an unsuccessful applicant could reapply to reduce premature repeat applications. Eligibility criteria for the degree at the time of reapplication would apply.
 - e. transfer responsibility from the Postgraduate Committee to the Degree Committee for decisions that candidates be approved for award of the degree, to improve timelines and reduce administration in line with other doctoral degrees. The Postgraduate Committee would remain the deciding authority not to award a Higher Doctorate degree.
 - f. introduce an option for an application to be declined, with a refund of the full fee, where it is not possible to engage Referees within a reasonable period of time.

Consultation commentary

Introduction

6. Higher Doctorate degrees conferred by the University are the Doctor of Divinity (DD), Doctor of Law (LLD), Doctor of Letters (LittD), Doctor of Medical Science (MedScD), Doctor of Music (MusD), and Doctor of Science (ScD).
7. The degrees are not gained through a defined programme of study, but by submission of a body of published research of high distinction. An Assessor is appointed to determine whether there is, *prima facie*, a case for examination of the work and if so, at least two Referees are appointed. Current eligibility criteria and application fee rates can be found in the Regulations for the relevant Higher Doctorate degree ([Ordinances, Chapter VII, Degrees, Diplomas and Other Qualifications](#) and the [Reporter No 6777](#) p. 436). Current application requirements can be found at [Higher doctorates | Cambridge students](#).
8. Higher Doctorate degrees are awarded to candidates whose submitted published work:
 - provides proof of academic distinction; and

- contains significant and original contribution to the advancement of science or learning or in musical composition; and
- reflects sustained academic achievement; and
- is world-leading in terms of originality, significance, and rigour; and
- entitles the candidate to be regarded as an authority in the field(s) of knowledge in which they have worked.

The level of attainment for a Higher Doctorate degree is substantially higher than that required for the PhD degree.

Applicant numbers

9. Approximately 13 eligible applications for Higher Doctorate degrees are received by the University each year.
10. Of the 237 applications received since 1 October 2004 where an outcome has been agreed:
 - 20% were unsuccessful at *prima facie* assessment.
 - 75% were awarded the degree.
 - 5% were not awarded the degree.
11. 93% of applicants over the same period were male.
12. Distribution of applicants by School over the same period was:

SHSS	24%	SAH	19%	SCM	12%
SPS	21%	SBS	13%	SoT	11%

Points for consideration

13. **Sector comparison**
 - a. An informal survey of Russell Group institutions in 2024 by the Postgraduate Research Office found 62% of responding institutions currently offer a Higher Doctorate. This figure is consistent with UKCGE findings in its report on [Higher Doctorates in the UK 2013](#). In both cases, the number of institutions responding to the survey was low.
 - b. Two of the responding institutions did offer Higher Doctorate degrees but have now withdrawn them. The University of Oxford suspended applications to Higher Doctorate degrees in 2023 and are currently reviewing their provision.

14. Potential benefit to the University

- a. Prestigious degree to recognise world-leading academic achievement by individuals who were previously educated in, or admitted to an office of, the University.
- b. Candidature may be perceived as an alumni benefit.
- c. May be advantageous to re-establish relationships with notable alumni.

Proposal A would support continuation of these benefits.

15. Potential disadvantages of Higher Doctorate degrees

- a. Requires significant time and effort to administer and assess.

Degree Committees are finding it challenging to identify willing Referees and secure reports from them within a reasonable time. This may be due to a reluctance to judge eminent peers despite doing so anonymously, perceptions of the value of the degrees, the volume of material to assess, or the fee paid to complete the assessment (£177.90, the same as that paid to PhD examiners).

Moreover, the University may not have any expertise in the field of research on which an application is based, making it difficult to identify which Degree Committee would be appropriate to award the degree and who might be an appropriate Referee.

The reluctance of Referees contributes to a drawn-out assessment with an average of 12 months (not proceed beyond *prima facie* assessment), to 16 months (pass), to 24 months (fail) from application to outcome.

- b. Requires a time commitment from the Chair of the Degree Committee, or other individual specified in Ordinances Chapter II, to present successful candidates for admission to the degree.

Proposal C would relieve the University of the challenges of administering the degrees.

Proposals A and C would respectively reduce or alleviate the cost of administering the degrees at a time of financial challenge.

- c. Applicants are not required to have contributed to the University's research profile. Higher Doctorate degrees can be awarded without any of the research having taken place at or in collaboration with the University.
- d. Applicants are not required to have an active relationship with the University. Candidates are typically in the mature stages of their career; those eligible by virtue of their undergraduate degree may well have had no contact with the University for many decades.

- e. The strategic purpose of the Higher Doctorate degrees is unclear. The degrees are not a recognised step in the University's promotion processes, nor are they used to reward lifetime academic achievements of staff.

Proposal C would withdraw degrees which may bring limited benefit to the University.

Proposal B could refocus the degrees to celebrate the contribution made by staff to both the world-wide advancement of knowledge and the University's research environment.

Moreover, staff appraisal could be used to encourage applications from deserving individuals who may not have considered applying under the current arrangements. Doing so may help address the significant gender imbalance of applicants.

16. Administrative cost to the University

- a. Higher Doctorate degree applicants pay a fee of £582, of which £510 is refunded if the application does not proceed beyond the *prima facie* stage (£360 fee for the BD, of which £288 is refunded).
- b. The estimated annual cost to the University of administering Higher Doctorate degrees is £13,690, but the average annual application fee income of £6,291 is insufficient to cover these costs (based on average 13 applications per year where 2.5 will not proceed beyond *prima facie* assessment, 0.5 will fail, and 9 will be approved).
- c. This estimate is very loose, as the administration cost for each application depends on the ease of finding willing Referees and their timely engagement with the assessment grade of staff, and the grade of staff involved at each stage.
- d. Application fees for Higher Doctorate degrees at other Universities who responded to our survey range from £630 to £2,393. The University of Oxford charged a £3,100 fee prior to suspending the degrees.

A fee increase to £1,830 is recommended to cover the costs of administering the degrees, of which £1,350 would be refunded if the application does not proceed beyond the *prima facie* stage is recommended. The fee for the BD will be proportionately adjusted.

Proposal A could offset the cost of administering the degrees.

17. Opt out

- a. Individual Degree Committees cannot 'opt out' from receiving applications for Higher Doctorate degrees. Should the University continue to offer the degrees, candidates should be able to apply to the faculty relevant for their field of study.