Supervisor – Research Student Agreement
Supporting positive and productive relationships between supervisors and students

WP#2 – Postgraduate Research

What you said (voice of the community):

"My own supervisor was **not clear** on what he **expected** from me or on **what he was offering as a supervisor**, and sometimes that was difficult when there was **a mismatch of expectations with actual experience**."

"We need **clarity of expectations** and **responsibilities** for both the student and the supervisor."

"(...) There's **no mutual sharing of expectations nor an agreement on the supervision process** i.e. on the purpose and frequency of supervision meetings, how and when feedback, documents, or meeting notes would be shared or if they were shared, and what direction or input the supervisor would give to the student."

"There is **no clarity and understanding** (...) **Set academic expectations for students**, especially international ones **clear at the beginning**."

"(...) **students also need to understand their supervisor's position**, and I think that if we help students to understand their position, and where they are coming from, maybe that relationship could be strengthened in some way."

What we learned (analysis):

- Good communication between student(s) and supervisor(s) is crucial to managing relationships and maximizes opportunities for successful collaboration.
- Clear definition of roles and responsibilities of both parties in the supervisory relationship enables enhanced expectations' setting.
- Research students and supervisors seek guidance and support for establishing productive supervision relationships, expectations' setting and clarifying responsibilities of both parties.

Measuring the sentiment towards a supervision agreement
Would you agree that introducing a supervision agreement at Trinity would be beneficial?
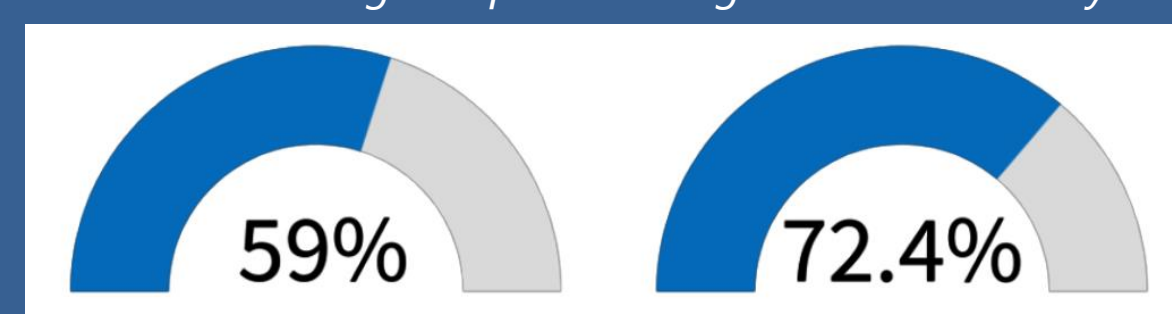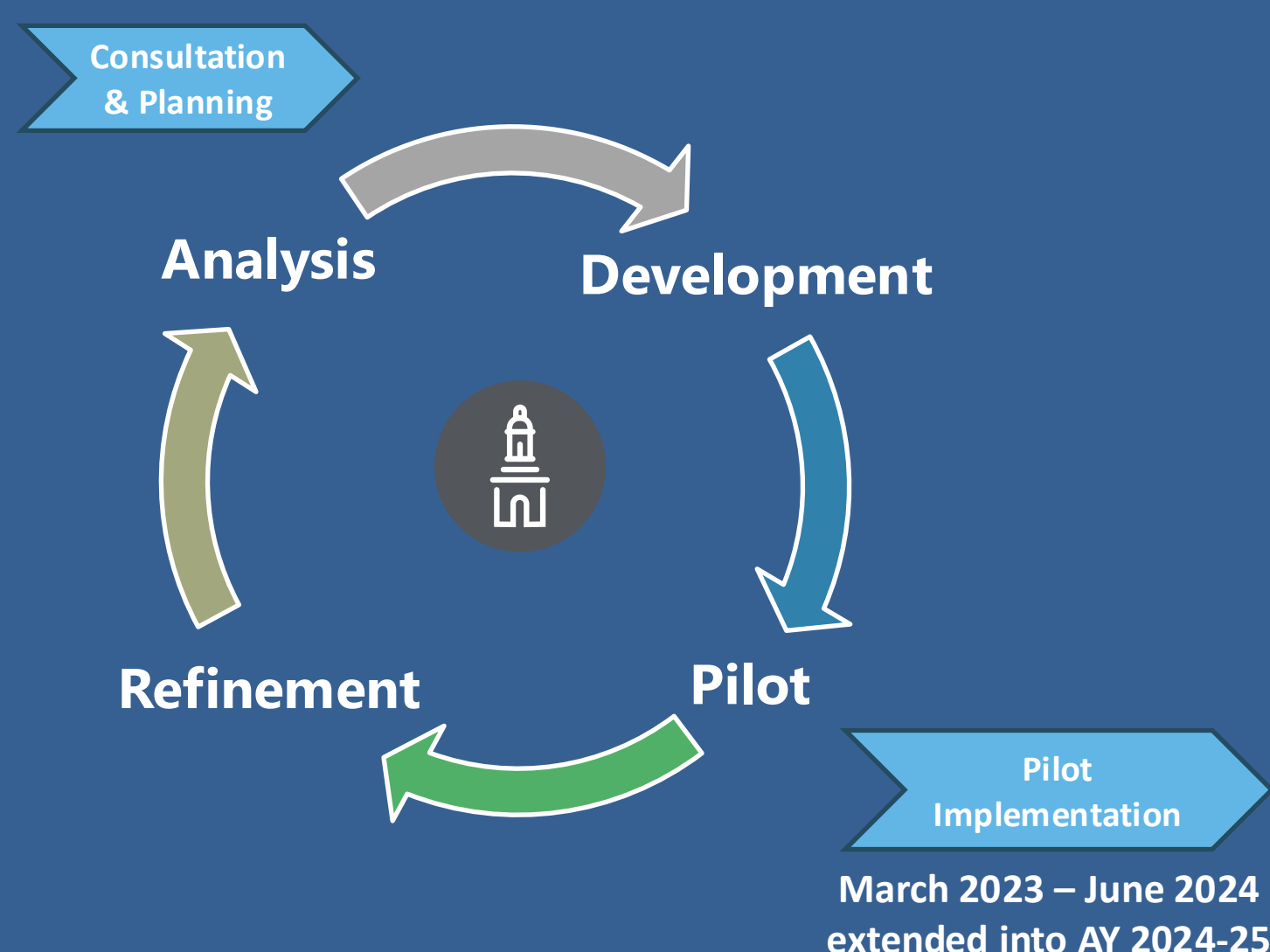
59% Academic & Research Staff

72.4% Research Students

Horizon 1: Development and a Pilot implementation of the Agreement

Iterative & Collaborative Development + Implementation

Consultation & Planning

Analysis → Development → Pilot → Refinement → Analysis

Pilot Implementation
March 2023 – June 2024 extended into AY 2024-25

Structure of the Agreement

- Academic Development
- Managing the Relationship
- Professional Development
- Wellbeing and Health
- Record of Agreement

How to maximise value of the Supervisor – Research Student Agreement

- Use it as a **structured guide for discussions**, helping to clarify your expectations.
- Treat it as **a flexible and evolving document**, adapting it to suit the specific needs of the supervisor, student, research domain, and stage of study.
- See the completed and signed agreement as a **commitment statement**, outlining reasonable expectations for both parties.
- **Review and update it regularly**—at least at the start of each academic year, but more frequently if needed (e.g., every six months).
- Use it as a **self-reflection tool** to clarify implicit expectations **and foster mutual understanding.**
- Leverage it as a **resource map**, helping to identify relevant sources of information and support.

During the first three months of the pilot, 27 supervisor-student pairs signed up to participate.

Horizon 2: Insights from interim evaluation of Agreement's pilot implementation (Year 1, Q1 2024)

Supervisors' perspectives

"It really helps us to see **the wider picture of all the responsibilities**, but also the sort of **links to the wider College structures and development of the student.**"

"We all felt that it's **a really good development**. You know, this is something that's **really helpful** for both supervisors and students."

"Students were quite surprised at some of the details that they weren't really aware of, so it **helped them to be aware of certain things.**"

"It's **really helpful and informative** and definitely **expanded their (students') understanding** of everything."

Students' perspectives

- Universally regarded as a good resource for establishing clarity on boundaries and expectations of both parties.
- Learning about paid annual leave was referenced by multiple students as one of the most beneficial outcomes of the agreement.
- Students valued the flexibility of the form which enabled them to tailor the agreement to their own needs.

Still to do:

Horizon 2 (ending Dec 2025)

- Complete evaluation of Year 2 of the Pilot: participant student and supervisor focus groups (200+ participants)
- Complete discussion with other stakeholder groups.
- Update of the agreement template to incorporate feedback from the community.
- Develop recommendation for College-wide implementation from the academic year 2025-26.
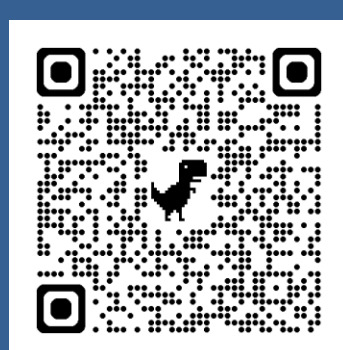
Scan to access the Agreement template

Benefits / Impact:

- **Enhances communication** between research students and supervisors, ensuring individual needs are met.
- **Establishes clear roles and responsibilities**, providing structure to the supervision relationship.
- **Improves expectation management**, fostering a more effective working environment.
- **Promotes transparency and accountability** throughout the student's research journey.

Assessing Progress in the PhD
## Enhancing guidance and tools for students and staff

WP#2 – Postgraduate Research

What you said (voice of the community):

"I could get access to the **feedback** from my supervisor, but **never from Thesis Committee**."

"If thesis committees were to work, they should **be assigned when a student begins**."

"Different schools and disciplines **use different terms** for the same things—this just adds to the **confusion!**"

"I **don't know where to find clear, consistent guidance** on Thesis Committees, Annual Reviews, or the Confirmation process. **Everyone seems to have a different understanding of how it works**."

"**What exactly is the role of a Thesis Committee member**? Are they meant to provide **pastoral support**? Can they also be internal examiners?"

What we learned (analysis):

- Guidance on Thesis Committees, Annual Review and Confirmation is inconsistent and may not be adequate.
- Lack of central 'source of truth' for the Thesis Committee process.
- College Calendar lacks sufficient guidance.
- Inconsistent terminology used with reference to Thesis Committees.
- Unclear roles and responsibilities of Thesis Committee members, including pastoral care, or eligibility to act as internal examiners.
- Students may miss out on formative feedback from Thesis Committees.
- Schools follow different timelines for establishing Thesis Committees.

Horizon 1 & 2: Value we delivered (enhancements to existing process)

- New **Terms of Reference for Thesis Committees** provide a central reference point and clarify:
    - Membership of a Thesis Committee,
    - Timeline for appointing a Thesis Committee,
    - Functions, roles and responsibilities of its members,
    - Meeting arrangements and a schedule of meetings,
    - Outcomes of formal review meetings, and
    - Reporting requirements.
- New **Thesis Committee Guidelines** provide:
    - Detailed guidance to students, supervisors and each member of a Thesis Committees on their roles and responsibilities.
    - Clarity on the role of Thesis Committee members in the provision of **pastoral care**.
    - Pathways for closing the feedback loop.
- **Enhanced reporting templates supporting Annual Reviews and the Confirmation process**:
    - Provide step-by-step guidance to students, staff and Thesis Committees,
    - Align with the overall development of the student by incorporating elements of the **Professional Development Planning**,
    - **Close the feedback loop** and ensure timely and meaningful engagement with the student at key review milestones.
- **Standardised deadlines for the completion of annual reviews and the confirmation process** ensure clarity and consistency across Schools, while allowing local flexibility.

Still to do:

Horizon 2 (ending Dec 2025)
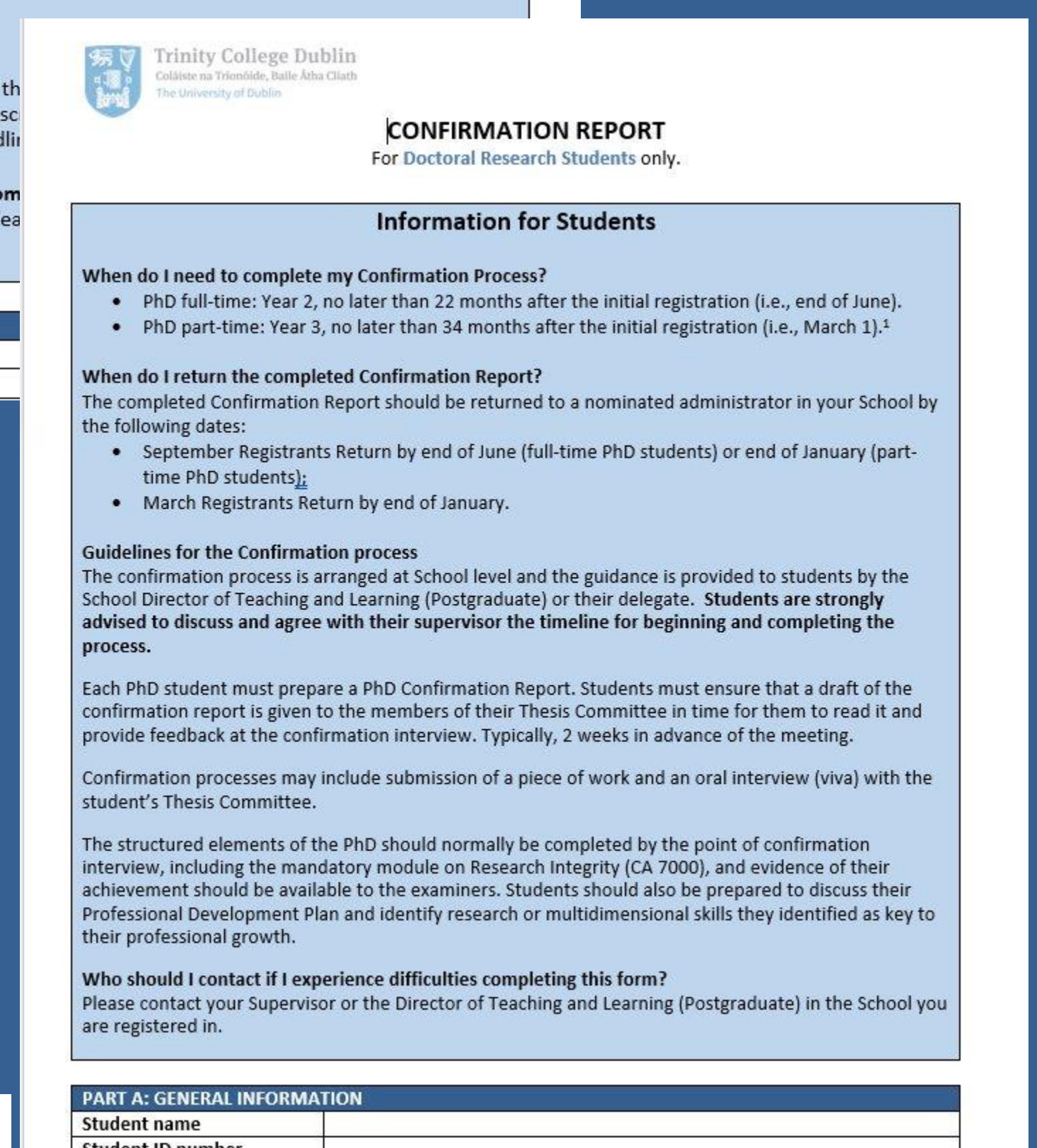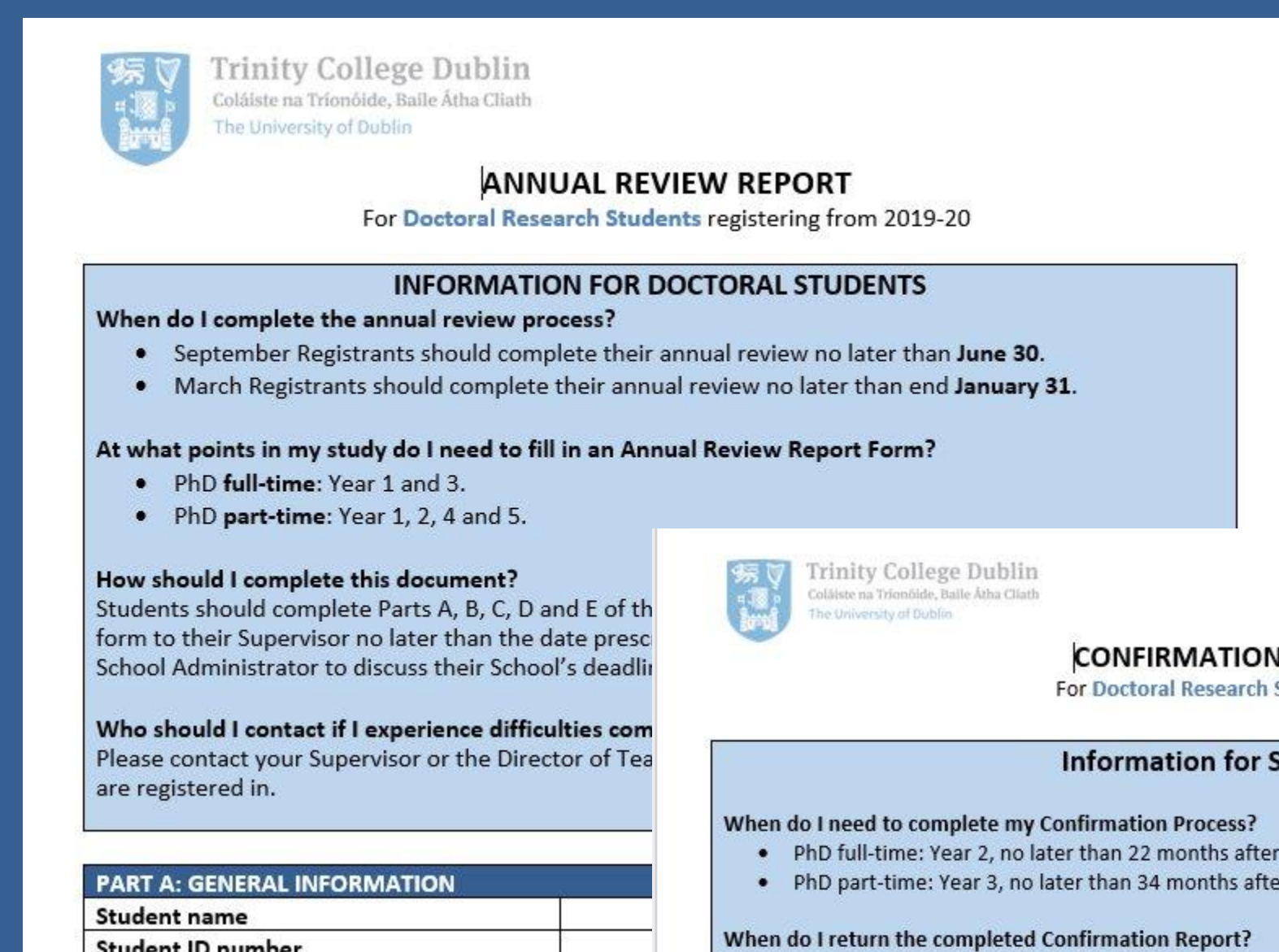
Evaluate impact of new resources:
- Terms of Reference for Thesis Committees
- Thesis Committee Guidelines
- Enhanced reporting templates:
    - Annual Review Report
    - Confirmation Report template
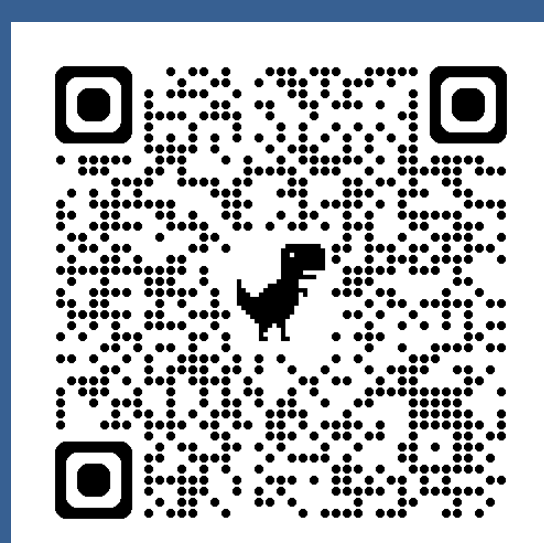
Scan to access new resources

Benefits / Impact

- **Improved Clarity and Consistency**

Clearly defined roles, timelines, and responsibilities enhance transparency and shared understanding for all stakeholders involved in PGR progression.

- **Enhanced Student Support**

Stronger focus on student development through integrated professional development planning.

- **Streamlined Processes and Accountability**

Standardised schedules and reporting requirements ensure timely reviews and follow-up, strengthening progression oversight.

- **Better Communication and Feedback**

Structured meeting schedules and enhanced templates facilitate meaningful dialogue and close the feedback loop at key milestones.

- **Institutional Alignment**

Updates to the College Calendar and aligned School deadlines promote shared language and consistency.

A Trinity Roadmap for Multidimensional Skill Development for PGR Students

WP#2 – Postgraduate Research

What you said (voice of the community):

- Despite a wide range of services and supports available to foster students' personal and professional development, the availability of information, ease of access, and overall experience of these services vary significantly across our Disciplines, Schools, and Faculties.
- Provide the student and supervisor with institutional supports and services to assist in the development of a broad skill portfolio.

What we learned (analysis):

- Trinity, as a member of IUA, must support research students in developing a broad skillset aligned with the IUA Doctoral Skills Statement.
- National policy drives emphasize the need for research excellence and development of a skilled population capable of sustaining Ireland's reputation for innovation and creativity.
- To future-proof our graduates, we must enable the growth of academic, professional, and transferable skills for diverse career paths.
- The University and supervisor, therefore, play a critical role in developing graduates who demonstrate research excellence and enhance Ireland's competitiveness at an international level.
- Current offerings are fragmented across multiple units, making it difficult for students and supervisors to navigate and access support effectively.

Horizon 1: Value we delivered

Articulated Roles and Responsibilities in the Development of a Student's Multidimensional Skillset

UNIVERSITY
- **Provides access** to relevant research infrastructures
- Provides additional **institutional support + services**
- **Assists in development** of transversal skills and a more comprehensive development profile
- **Supports** the supervisor-student relationship

STUDENT
- **Engages** with multidimensional skills learning opportunities and **proactively develops the core competencies** outlined in the IUA Doctoral Skills Statement

SUPERVISOR
- **A facilitator and enabler**
- **Signposts** to the relevant professional development opportunities
- **Supports** attendance
- **Encourages** student to avail of training opportunities

Aligned PGR Skills Development with the IUA Doctoral Skills Statement

IUA Doctoral Skills Statement, 3rd Edition, 2021

Horizon 2: Additional value generated

- **Reviewed all structured learning opportunities** available to research students across the University.
- **Mapped each opportunity** to the **IUA Doctoral Skills Statement** (2021) skill domains.
- Identified delivery formats, resource needs, and capacity as the foundation for **a strategic gap analysis**.
- Conducted international **benchmarking to highlight best practices**.
- **Engaged with key stakeholders** (17 Schools) to assess current practices and identify gaps.

AHSS	STEM	HS	Total
10/12	3/8	4/4	17/24

- **Engaged with students** and incorporated their feedback to reflect lived experiences and needs.
- **Integrated Personal Development Planning** into the **annual review** and **confirmation report** templates.
- Developed and rolled out a **standardised Personal Development Planning (PDP) template** to **enhance the students' experience of professional development planning.**
- **Delivered a student workshop** on the process of **Personal Development Planning.**

Still to do:

Horizon 2 (ending December 2025)

- Evaluate pilot of PDP template and consider recommendations for wider implementation and roll-out.
- Integrate with Interdisciplinary, Intersectoral and International (Triple I) opportunities.
- Provide training, guidance and support for multidimensional skills development and career planning to research students.
- Standardise and support the Supervisor's role in multidimensional skills training.

Post December 2025

- Provide central coordination for Doctoral Skills Development to ensure consistency, inclusivity and equitable access to training opportunities for all research students.
- Deliver a resource to allow students to identify skills required, access opportunities and track their achievements.

Impact (what would success look like):

All research students at Trinity can access and pursue **centrally coordinated** and **clearly communicated opportunities** to **develop a multidimensional skillset** of **research specific, generic and transversal skills** that positions them for success within their future careers, both outside and within academia.

Supporting Teaching & Learning Activities Provided by PGRs

What you said (voice of the community):

"Some students seem to get all the opportunities while others aren't even told they exist."

"Our teaching model is quite discipline-specific - what works in a lab-based science module is very different from what's needed in a seminar-based humanities setting."

"We also need timely payment and recognition - it's frustrating when things are delayed or unclear. "

"It would be great to know upfront what's expected of us when we take on teaching - sometimes it's not clear what counts as part of the role or how we'll be supported."

"Any framework has to allow for variation as our approach reflects long-standing practices that suit our discipline's teaching needs."

"We've developed our own process for allocating teaching over the years, and it's working well for us. We'd welcome consistency, but we also need room to maintain what already functions effectively."

"Having some kind of formal certification for our teaching would be incredibly valuable—it's something we can include in our CVs and use when applying for jobs."

What we learned (analysis):

- The opportunity to participate in teaching provides an important pedagogical experience for research students.
- There is a need for transparency, equity, and consistency in how teaching opportunities are allocated and managed.
- Students need clear communication about available roles and expectations, fair access to teaching opportunities and recognition - both financial and professional - for their contributions.
- Schools must be afforded flexibility to reflect the diverse norms and practices across Schools and Disciplines when communicating and allocating
- Teaching and learning supports provided by postgraduate research students must be acknowledged and recognised.

Horizon 1: Certificate of Recognition for Teaching Supports

Certificate of Recognition for Teaching Supports provided by a Postgraduate Research Student

- A formal mechanism to recognise teaching contributions provided by postgraduate research students, for inclusion on students' CVs.
- A self-declaration of student's teaching hours, validated by either a module coordinator or the Head of School.
- Easily accessible for download on the Graduate Studies website.
- Students are responsible for providing the required details and obtaining the signatures.
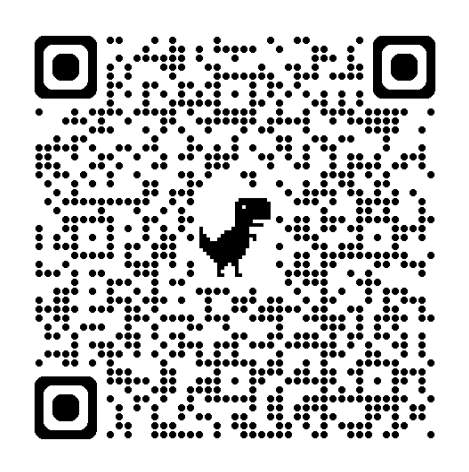
Scan to access the Certificate online

Horizon 2: Guidelines on the nature of teaching expectations and the process of allocating teaching opportunities to postgraduate research students

Outline of the Guidelines:

1. **Types of teaching activities:**
   - Examples of activities postgraduate researcg students should and should NOT be encouraged to do (to be adapted by Schools/Disciplines).
2. **What defines a teaching hour?**
3. **Limits on teaching time.**
4. **The expectations in relation to teaching activities:**
   - Defining types of teaching activities
   - Payment for the teaching / demonstrating
   - Training opportunities
   - Monitoring and recognizing performance
5. **The process of allocation of teaching opportunities to students:**
   - Application and selection process
   - Dissemination of opportunities
   - Defining selection criteria
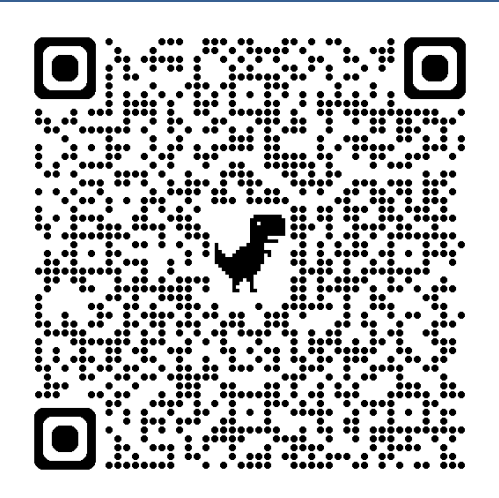   - Contact person to discuss teaching opportunities

Schools are encouraged to customise the Guidelines and:

- **Clearly outline the duties expected** of each student involved in teaching activities and **include them in your School or Discipline handbook**.
- **Communicate teaching opportunities as they arise** and **offer them equally** to all interested postgraduate research students within your School or Discipline.
- **Specify which teaching activities are covered in the hourly reimbursement rate and ensure prompt, and direct payment for all student teaching activities.**
- **Appoint a designated staff member as** contact who coordinates teaching opportunities and monitors the teaching workloads of postgraduate research student.
- **Support** graduate teaching assistants and demonstrators through **training, induction, and recognition of their teaching contributions**.

Still to do:

Horizon 2 (ending Dec 2025)

- Raise awareness of the Certificate of Recognition for Teaching Supports provided by a Postgraduate Research Student and promote its use among students.
- Engage with all Schools to embed awareness of the Guidelines and their value for staff and students across the university

Scan to view the Guidelines