



**SPHeRE** 

Structured Population health, Policy  
and Health-services Research Education

## ROUTES TO COMPLETION OF THE SPHERE PHD PROGRAMME (FULL-TIME & PART-TIME)

### POLICY AND PROCEDURES

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## Summary

This document outlines the various routes to completion for Scholars undertaking their PhD at their registered institution and through the structured SPHeRE PhD training programme on a full-time or part-time basis. It concludes with a brief discussion on exiting the Programme prior to completion.

The decision to undertake a PhD on a full-time or part-time basis often correlates with funding:

- Scholars awarded HRB SPHeRE Programme funding are full-time Scholars and are expected to complete their PhD within 4 years, and to participate in all Programme activities, e.g. milestone events, placements, workshops, peer-learning events etc.
- Self-funded Scholars often choose to work on their PhDs on a part-time basis, over a period longer than 4 years. Some exceptions apply, e.g. placements.
- For Scholars in receipt of funding from other sources, decisions surrounding the duration of their PhD are interconnected with the terms of their funding (i.e. if they have received funding for full-time study over 4 years). Some exceptions may apply based on funding support, e.g. international placements.

## Institutional & SPHeRE Registration Regulations

Specific routes to completion available to Scholars also depend on the registration requirements of the Higher Education Institution (HEI) in which they are registered.

Scholars are in the first instance required to meet all requirements set out by the institution in which they are registered. It is important for Scholars to be aware of the minimum and maximum registration regulations for full time and part time students in their institutions. Scholars undertaking their PhDs on a part-time basis should carefully consider the minimum part-time and full-time registration criteria in their HEI when deciding whether to pay full or part-time fees. The table below illustrates minimum and maximum registration times in the 3 core HEIs and Scholars registering in other HEIs must familiarise themselves with the registration criteria of their HEI. This detail is normally available through the postgraduate studies offices of the HEI.

Min/max Registration (RCSI, TCD, UCC)		
	Part time	Full Time
RCSI	5yrs/8yrs	3yrs/6yrs
TCD	3yrs/6yrs	2yrs/4yrs
UCC	6yrs/6yrs	3yrs/6yrs

Where a Scholar wishes to register beyond the maximum registration, it may be necessary to reapply to their host institution and to undergo a formal review process to determine the status of the work completed and the likelihood of completing a thesis to a PhD standard within a set period of time. This process is independent of the SPHeRE Programme, but may

be used to inform SPHeRE Programme Management decisions regarding continued progression on the SPHeRE PhD Programme, or a recommendation for exiting the PhD Programme.

Procedures whereby Scholars, whether full-time or part-time, can 'pause' their studies and suspend their registration in response to a change in circumstances can be discussed. Any pause to study will require approval from both the registered institution and SPHeRE Programme prior to a Scholar taking a leave of absence.

### ***Scholarships and Completion Time***

Scholars in receipt of HRB SPHeRE funding are funded for 4 years on a full-time basis. Should the PhD project extend beyond those 4 years (full-time), the Scholar will be responsible for any registration fees beyond the 4 years covered by the Scholarship. To remain in the Programme beyond year 4 (full-time), Scholars must be in good standing with their host institution with regard to fee payment/registration and must be working within an approved Yr3 thesis completion and/or Yr4 progress plan.

Scholars should be aware of their institutional regulations regarding min/max years of registration. In addition, the SPHeRE Programme has set a maximum completion time for all Scholars of no more than one extra year on top of their chosen completion model, for example 1+3, 1+4, 1+5, 2+3, etc., unless they have received special permission from the Programme Co-Directors. The aim of this maximum duration is to ensure that Scholars progress through the programme and obtain their PhDs in a timely fashion and within the maximum registration periods of their institution.

## **Full Time Completion of the SPHeRE PhD Programme (1+3)**

Full-time PhD Scholars on the SPHeRE Programme are expected to work on their PhDs on a full-time basis, throughout the four years of the Programme, i.e. an average of 39 hours per week for the standard 46 working weeks per year, accepting that there may be periods where additional hours of work are required.

Scholars funded through the HRB SPHeRE Programme **are not permitted to work in paid-employment** while in receipt of the Scholarship. Where Scholars take on unpaid work additional to their PhD, Scholars should ensure that this does not impact on their ability to undertake their PhD activities.

Full-time PhD Scholars are required to participate in all Programme activities, e.g. milestone events, placements, workshops, peer learning events etc. Where exceptional circumstances arise, the Programme administrator should be informed ([sphere@rcsi.ie](mailto:sphere@rcsi.ie)).

In year one, all full-time Scholars are required to attend face-to-face and online sessions and to successfully pass the taught modules. The table below sets out the 'ideal phase' completion plan for full-time Scholars on the SPHeRE Programme, the '1 + 3' model, i.e. a one year taught programme followed by three years of research.

Full-Time Completion of SPHeRE Programme (1+3)	
<b>Year 1</b>	Completion of taught programme (24 weeks) 4 compulsory workshops National Work Placement (8 weeks) (May- Sep) Thesis Proposal: Deadline end-July
<b>Year 2</b>	Completion of compulsory and advanced workshops Thesis Progress Report deadline end March Thesis-related journal article: deadline end Aug International work placement (2 week): Year 2 or Year 3.
<b>Year 3</b>	Completion of compulsory and advanced workshops International Work Placement (2 week): Year 2 or Year 3. Thesis Completion Report: end July Thesis-related policy brief: deadline end Aug
<b>Year 4</b>	Completion of compulsory and advanced workshops Thesis Progress Update Report: end June Thesis completion & submission (deadline end of year 4)*

*\*Scholars should refer to the guidelines, regulations, and deadlines of their host institution for information on thesis submission and examination.*

## Part time PhD Completion of the SPHeRE Programme

Part time completion of the SPHeRE programme will vary according to the circumstances of the individual Scholar, though Scholars must at all times meet the requirements of SPHeRE and their registered institution. We will endeavour to work with individual Scholars and to be flexible where possible in order to enable them to successfully complete the Programme while also managing their work and/or family commitments, e.g. around the national or international placement. It is important to stress however that as SPHeRE is a structured training programme, there are minimum requirements that must be met within specified time periods, e.g. attendance at modules as scheduled (one day per week), completion of a thesis proposal and approval from an Academic Panel before further progression on the training Programme, completion of annual milestone reports and procedures in subsequent years etc.

Part-Time Completion of SPHeRE PhD Programme	
<b>Programme Components and milestones</b>	Completion of 6 taught modules 20+ workshops over course of PhD National Work Placement (8 weeks) (where appropriate/feasible) International Work Placement (2 week) (where appropriate/feasible) Stage 1 Thesis Proposal Stage 2 Thesis Review Stage 3 Thesis Completion Report (penultimate year) Stage 4 Thesis Progress Update Report, thesis completion & submission Annual Thesis Progress Reports in the years between Stage reporting

For part-time Scholars to maintain momentum and to successfully complete their PhD project, we recommend that part-time Scholars and their supervisors select a model of part-time study best suited to their circumstances (e.g. 1+3, 1+4, 1+5, 2+3, etc) and to structure their work

accordingly insofar as is possible. Scholars should work closely with their supervisors to ensure that deadlines associated with their model of study (e.g. 1+3, 1+4, 1+5, 2+3, etc) are scheduled into their planning and are met, and that the PhD work progresses steadily.

Meeting the components and milestones set out in the table above in timely fashion can support a higher completion rate among part-time Scholars. It is important that potential applicants and Scholars remain realistic from the outset about how much of a time commitment is involved in a part-time PhD. Unrealistic expectations of completion times will lead to frustration/disillusion and high drop-out rates among part time students. What follows provides an estimated workload for successful completion of a PhD through the SPHeRE Programme.

It should be noted that readiness to submit/complete the Programme is determined on the basis and standard of the PhD work, rather than on time spent on the Programme, i.e. there is no guarantee of completing your PhD within 4 years, even if studying on a full time basis.

### **Estimated Workload Taught Component**

The taught programme is delivered in blended mode between October and May of each academic year, i.e. online activities complemented by weekly face-to-face sessions. Face-to-face sessions usually occur on Wednesdays from 10:30-16:30, and are held in RCSI, TCD, and UCC at different times over the academic year. Days and times may differ on occasion and Scholars will be given as much advance notice as possible. Attendance at the face-to-face sessions is mandatory for successful completion of the modules<sup>1</sup>.

In year one, we advise part-time Scholars to complete the taught programme alongside their full-time colleagues, but only where possible and feasible. This involves committing to approx. 25 weeks of tuition between Oct- May.

There are a number of reasons for this advice, not least of which that participation in the year one programme will enable part-time Scholars to meet and get to know other Scholars (both full and part time) on the programme. The reality of conducting a PhD is one where people spend a large portion of time working on their unique project. It is hoped however that the peer network established from the first year will provide opportunities for people to support each other throughout the PhD process and will help reduce the traditional isolation of the

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<sup>1</sup> Completion of the 6 taught modules is a requirement for progression on the PhD programme.

lone PhD student. As has also happened, we anticipate that these networks will continue to form the basis for future professional links between alumni.

If it is not possible for a part-time Scholar to complete the taught component within one year, it is also appropriate to complete it over two years. If Scholars wish to complete the taught component over two years, they should liaise with the Assistant Director for Teaching and Learning to decide what modules to take in each year. This is necessary for ensuring Moodle access.

Scholars completing their modules in one year present their proposal outline in June and submit their detailed proposal for review in July of their first academic year. Scholars completing their modules in two years present their proposal outline in June and submit their detailed proposal for review in July of their second academic year.

Scholars must successfully complete all six modules before being eligible to submit their proposal for review by an Academic Panel. Successful completion of a module includes passing assignments. Where a Scholar fails an assignment, they will be provided with an opportunity to resubmit. Where a Scholar fails the same assignment a second time, they will be referred to the SPHeRE Programme Management Team (See section below 'Exiting the SPHeRE PhD Training Programme').

## National and International Work Placements for Part-Time Scholars

Depending on circumstances, it may not be feasible for part-time Scholars to complete a national and/or international work placement. Scholars and supervisors should work closely to develop an equivalent piece of work for part-time Scholars. For instance, it might be possible for them to develop a specific piece of work within their own workplaces. This should be negotiated with their supervisors, and where a placement is conducted should be written up as a brief report and submitted to the SPHeRE Programme Office ([sphere@rcsi.ie](mailto:sphere@rcsi.ie)).

## Estimated Workload for PhD Research

Scholars completing the SPHeRE Programme on a part-time basis and hoping to complete the PhD within a certain timeframe should carefully calculate the amount of time they will need to set aside for their PhD study on the basis that a full-time Scholar seeking to complete within the 1+3 model will have to spend 39 hours per week on PhD work. It is important to ring-fence a certain number of hours per week that are purely for PhD research, along with using workplace annual leave for this purpose. Additionally, we strongly advise part-time Scholars to discuss with their employers options for securing protected time for the PhD.

Estimated PhD Research Workload by PhD Model						
PhD Model	1+3	1+4	1+5	1+6	2+4	2+6
Years for Modules/Proposal Submission	1	1	1	1	2	2
Years for Research	3	4	5	6	4	6

<b>Avg Working Weeks Per Year</b>	46	46	46	46	46	46
<b>Overall PhD Research Workload (avghours)</b>	5382	5382	5382	5382	5382	5382
<b>Estimated Hours Weekly on PhD (averaged)</b>	39	29	23.4	19.5	29	19.5

Scholars and supervisors should discuss which model of PhD a Scholar intends to pursue. A decision should be made by the end of the first year, and the Scholar should inform the SPHeRE Administrator ([sphere@rcsi.ie](mailto:sphere@rcsi.ie)). This information is necessary for assigning Scholars to an appropriate Academic Panel, and for scheduling anticipated milestone deadlines. An estimated set of deadlines from modules through to submission and across the different models of PhD is contained in Appendix 1. This can help Scholars develop an appropriately detailed Gantt chart and project plan, a requirement for thesis proposals and annual progress reports.

## Exiting the SPHeRE PhD Training Programme

Circumstances may arise where a Scholar exits the SPHeRE PhD Training Programme. From experience, this has most frequently been due to changing life circumstances and the difficulties in allocating sufficient time to completing a PhD within the maximum time allowed.

Scholars who wish to remain on the SPHeRE PhD Training Programme must:

- Complete all taught modules and workshops;
- Meet regularly with their supervisors;
- Meet each annual progression milestone on time;
- Have each milestone approved by an Academic Panel;
- Meet the requirements of their registered institution.

Successful completion of modules is the first major milestone, and is required to submit a thesis proposal for review by the Academic Panel. Where a Scholar fails the same module twice they will be referred to the SPHeRE Management Team. While the aim will be to find a workable course of action, failure to complete a module could lead to a recommendation that the Scholar exits from the SPHeRE Programme.

Academic Panels review all subsequent milestones in the first instance. Academic Panels serve a critical review and advisory function on the SPHeRE PhD Training Programme. Academic Panels grade the thesis proposal and reports submitted by Scholar cohorts each year.

While rare, a person may be referred to the SPHeRE Programme Management Team where an Academic Panel raise concerns about progress. These include:

1. where a Scholar receives a recommendation of ‘Major Revisions’ and a request to resubmit, and then a second recommendation of ‘Major Revisions’ on the resubmitted work.



2. where a Scholar does not engage with the SPHeRE Programme when unable to meet an agreed deadline, and within two months of the agreed deadline.
3. other instances or issues arising that suggest a Scholar is experiencing difficulties and/or is not meeting the institutional and/or SPHeRE requirements. These too may warrant referral to the SPHeRE Management Team.

A representative(s) of the SPHeRE Management Team will correspond with the Scholar where such instances arise, and if necessary with the Scholar's supervisor. A meeting will be arranged to discuss and determine future courses of action. In cases where sufficient progress is not being made - especially on a repeated basis and following previous Module lead, Academic Panel and/or SPHeRE Management Team interventions - the SPHeRE Co-Directors may recommend that the Scholar exit from the SPHeRE Programme. This decision is at the discretion of the SPHeRE Co-Directors and does not necessarily imply an exit from the registered institution.

Scholars that exit the SPHeRE Programme may be eligible to continue their PhD studies at their registered institution, subject to having completed all necessary requirements (e.g. continuation assessments) and with the approval of their supervisor and/or registered department. This is outside the remit of SPHeRE and must be followed up independently by the Scholar and/or their supervisor.

Please refer to the SPHeRE Exit Policy, which can be found on Moodle, for procedures pertaining to Scholars who are withdrawing from their PhD entirely.

## Appendix 1

### Indicative Deadlines & Milestones for completing the SPHeRE PhD Programme (1+3, 1+4, 1+5, 1+6, 2+4, 2+6)\*

	1+3 (full-time)	1+4	1+5	1+6	2+4	2+6
<b>Year 1</b>	Module Assignments (Oct-May) Thesis presentation day (mid June) National placement (May-Sept) Thesis proposal (end July)	Module Assignments (Oct-May) Thesis presentation day (mid June) National placement (May-Sept) Thesis proposal (end July)	Module Assignments (Oct-May) Thesis presentation day (mid June) National placement (May-Sept) Thesis proposal (end July)	Module Assignments (Oct-May) Thesis presentation day (mid June) National placement (May-Sept) Thesis proposal (end July)	Module Assignments (Selected module dependent) National Placement (May-Sept year 1 or year 2)	Module Assignments (Selected module dependent) National Placement (May-Sept year 1 or year 2)
<b>Year 2</b>	Thesis review report (end March) Thesis related journal article (end Aug) International Placement	Thesis review report (end March) International Placement	Thesis review report (end March) International Placement	Thesis review report (end March)	Module Assignments (Selected module dependent) Thesis presentation day (mid June) Thesis proposal (end July) National Placement (May-Sept year 1 or year 2)	Module Assignments (Selected module dependent) Thesis presentation day (mid June) Thesis proposal (end July) National Placement (May-Sept year 1 or year 2)
<b>Year 3</b>	Thesis completion plan (end July) Thesis related policy brief (end Aug) International Placement (if not completed in year 2)	Thesis progress report (end June) Thesis related journal article (end Aug) International Placement (if not completed in year 2)	Thesis progress report (end June) Thesis related journal article (end Aug) International Placement (if not completed in year 2)	Thesis progress report (end June) Thesis related journal article (end Aug) International Placement (if not completed in year 2)	Thesis review report (end March) International Placement	Thesis review report (end March) International Placement
<b>Year 4</b>	Thesis progress update report (end June) <b>Thesis completion &amp; submission*.</b>	Thesis completion plan (end July) Thesis related policy brief (end Aug)	Thesis progress report (end June)	Thesis progress report (end June)	Thesis progress report (end June) Thesis related journal article (end Aug) International Placement (if not completed in year 3)	Thesis progress report (end June) Thesis related journal article (end Aug) International Placement (if not completed in year 3)
<b>Year 5</b>		Thesis progress update report (end June) <b>Thesis completion &amp; submission*.</b>	Thesis completion plan (end July) Thesis related policy brief (end Aug)	Thesis completion plan (end July) Thesis related policy brief (end Aug)	Thesis completion plan (end July) Thesis related policy brief (end Aug)	Thesis progress report (end June)
<b>Year 6</b>			Thesis progress update report (end June) <b>Thesis completion &amp; submission*.</b>	Thesis progress report (end June)	Thesis progress update report (end June) <b>Thesis completion &amp; submission*.</b>	Thesis completion plan (end July) Thesis related policy brief (end Aug)
<b>Year 7</b>				Thesis progress update report (end June) <b>Thesis completion &amp; submission*.</b>		Thesis progress report (end June)
<b>Year 8</b>						Thesis progress update report (end June) <b>Thesis completion &amp; submission*.</b>

\*Scholars should refer to the guidelines, regulations, and deadlines of their host institution for information on thesis submission and examination.