

# FAQs for GEP-2023

## Section-0:

### 0.1 Is GEP-2023 applicable retrospectively?

- a. No, but with some conditions. HEC has issued a Graduate Education Policy 2023 (GEP-2023) which is effective from July 10, 2023. Therefore, all the previous policies and notifications issued by HEC regarding MS/MPhil and PhD programs in Pakistan have ceased to be effective on the students enrolled after the effective date. However, while the students enrolled before the promulgation of GEP-2023 would continue to be governed by the policies effective at the time of their enrollment, such students may also consent to be governed entirely by the provisions of GEP-2023 provided that their respective university has officially adopted/adapted this policy through its statutory bodies following the guidelines provided under Applicability section of GEP-2023.

### 0.2 Does GEP-2023 allow offering degree programs as part time?

- a. No, GEP-2023 only allows offering degree programs as Full Time.

### 0.3 What does a Full-Time degree program mean?

- a. Per the HEC's *Policy Guidelines for Implementation of Uniform Semester Examination System in HEIs*, a graduate student must take at least 9 CH in a Regular Semester to be classified as a Full-Time student. Accordingly, a Full-Time graduate degree program shall be a program that enrolls students as Full-Time. It may be a morning, evening, or weekend degree program.

## Section-2:

### 2.1(ii) – Which type of test HEC prescribes for admission in MS/MPhil/Equivalent degree program?

- a. GRE/HAT/Equivalent test.

### 2.1(i)&(iii) – Does a prospective graduate student with an intra-disciplinary background need to take two admission tests i.e., GRE/HAT General and GRE Subject or only GRE Subject is enough?

- a. Yes, GRE Subject test is an additional requirement for a prospective student intending to MS/MPhil or PhD from an Intra-disciplinary field, while GRE/HAT General or Equivalent is a fundamental requirement for each student aiming to gain admission in a graduate degree program. Hence, a prospective graduate student coming from an Intra-disciplinary field must take two tests i.e., the GRE Subject and GRE/HAT General / Equivalent.

### 2.1(iii)+(footnote 1) – How to determine an inter-disciplinary admission?

- a. The ISCED-F-2013 classify educational fields into three level: i-Broader Field, ii-Narrow Field, and iii-Detailed Filed. Application of Intra-disciplinary, as defined by GEP-2023, may be determined as follows:
  - i. GEP-2023 does not allow interdisciplinary admissions from one Broader Field to another Broader Field.
  - ii. However, Intra-disciplinary admissions i.e. among Narrow Fields lying within one Broader Field are allowed. GEP-2023 applies here and requires applying the conditions prescribed under clause 2.1(iii).
  - iii. But the GEP-2023 does not essentially require applying the requirements of clause 2.1(iii) at third level of classification i.e. cross-disciplinary admissions among Detailed Fields lying within a Narrow Field.

**2.1(iii) – How to offer deficiency courses while awarding Intra-disciplinary admission?**

- a. Subject to fulfilment of other prescribed requirements, an HEI may award provisional admission and allow the prospective student to take deficiency courses. Admission may be confirmed after successful completion of deficiency courses.

**2.1(iii)-2- Whether a Level 6 qualification in certain disciplines may be considered to determine intra-disciplinary eligibility for admission into graduate programs under the GEP-2023?**

To determine students' eligibility for admission into graduate programs under the intra-disciplinary provision of GEP-2023, the HEIs may consider the academic background across all relevant levels of higher education—without treating irrelevance at any single level as disqualification—while placing primary emphasis on the Level-6 disciplinary foundation, provided the overall academic trajectory aligns with the intra-disciplinary requirement defined in GEP-2023.

**2.1(iii)-3 – Can a university design a graduate program that admits students from academic backgrounds outside the program's primary discipline, while still complying with the HEC's Graduate Education Policy (GEP-2023)?**

- a. Yes. Under the GEP-2023, HEIs may design graduate programs within a broad discipline that accommodate students from allied academic backgrounds, provided they remain within the policy's provisions. This can be achieved by using the flexible interdisciplinary classifications in UNESCO's ISCED-F 2013 framework and applying the nomenclature guidelines in HEC's National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

To develop such a program, an HEI should:

- i. **Use ISCED-F 2013's interdisciplinary sub-categories:** Each of the ten broad disciplines listed in ISCED-F 2013 includes an "interdisciplinary" sub-category (e.g., 0688 for ICT-based programs integrating business, natural sciences, or engineering content) that allows classification of programs combining two or more fields.
- ii. **Determine the program's classification and title** according to the NQF's rules, based on content composition and the primary disciplinary emphasis. For example:
  - *MS in Information Technology (with Business Analytics)*
  - *MS in Computing and Management Science*
  - *MS in IT with Statistical Modeling*
- iii. **Include deficiency or bridging courses** for students from non-primary-discipline backgrounds, in line with GEP-2023 provisions.
- iv. **Seek HEC's NOC** before launching the program, following the prescribed procedure.
- v. **Admit students through a special admission track** that specifies eligibility criteria for those from allied fields.

This approach allows universities to expand access while maintaining compliance with HEC policies, ensuring that program design reflects both the primary discipline and the diverse academic backgrounds of admitted students.

**2.1(iv) – Shall the CH earned through deficiency courses be mentioned on the student's transcript?**

- a. Yes, the CH earned through deficiency courses shall be mentioned on the student's transcript, however, shall not be counted towards calculating CGPA of the level 7 degree.

**2.2(c)-1 – Can a faculty member with MS/MPhil degree supervise a student enrolled for MS/MPhil/Equivalent degree?**

- a. In line with its principle of University Autonomy, the GEP-2023 keeps this prospect open for the HEIs and requests them to develop their own policy and demonstrate responsibility in this regard.

**2.2(c)-2 – In case an MS/MPhil/Equivalent degree is offered with the research work, the university is required to develop its policy regarding thesis defense and evaluation through its statutory bodies. Does this include the supervision as well?**

- a. Yes, it also includes the supervision of MS/MPhil/Equivalent student. However, the supervisory ratio for a PhD faculty member shall be in line with the prescription of GEP 2023.

**2.3(ii) Can an HEI permit a student, who was admitted to a graduate degree program prior to 2016 and later became dormant or time-barred for an extended period, to resume or continue the program?**

- a. HEC introduced its first policy defining minimum - maximum duration to complete an MS/MPhil program on March 18, 2016. Before the promulgation of this policy, the university's own policy enacted at the time of student's admission would be applicable.

However, while considering to re-continue a discontinued degree program for a student who was enrolled long ago, but became dormant after completing a few courses, the HEI may assess the Academic Requirements including curriculum changes, credit transfer: student's academic standing etc., and Institutional/Regulatory Policies like time limitations, approval of the relevant bodies, re-enrollment process etc.

**2.4(ii) – The GEP-2023 allows transferring research work to host university with its consent, does it not need the consent of parent university?**

- b. Per the provisions of this policy, the research work is the shared property of the research supervisor and the student. Therefore, the student needs the consent of the supervisor before transferring research work to another university. The parent university is expected to allow Credit/Research Transfer if no liability other than academic work exists on part of the student.

**Section-3:**

**3.1 – Does HEC determine admission eligibility of a prospective graduate student?**

- a. No, determining eligibility for admission in a degree program is the prerogative of HEIs, while HEC's provides regulatory guidelines.

**3.2–1- Whether a Level 6 qualification in certain disciplines may be considered to determine intra-disciplinary eligibility for admission into graduate programs under the GEP-2023?**

To determine students' eligibility for admission into graduate programs under the intra-disciplinary provision of GEP-2023, the HEIs may consider the academic background across all relevant levels of higher education—without treating irrelevance at any single level as disqualification—while placing primary emphasis on the Level-6 disciplinary foundation, provided the overall academic trajectory aligns with the intra-disciplinary requirement defined in GEP-2023.

**3.2 –2- Can a university design a graduate program that admits students from academic backgrounds outside the program's primary discipline, while still complying with the HEC's Graduate Education Policy (GEP-2023)?**

- a. Yes. Under the GEP-2023, HEIs may design graduate programs within a broad discipline that accommodate students from allied academic backgrounds, provided they remain within the policy's provisions. This can be achieved by using the flexible interdisciplinary classifications in UNESCO's ISCED-F 2013 framework and applying the nomenclature guidelines in HEC's National Qualifications Framework (NQF).

To develop such a program, an HEI should:

- vi. **Use ISCED-F 2013's interdisciplinary sub-categories:** Each of the ten broad disciplines listed in ISCED-F 2013 includes an "interdisciplinary" sub-category (e.g., 0688 for ICT-based programs integrating business, natural sciences, or engineering content) that allows classification of programs combining two or more fields.
- vii. **Determine the program's classification and title** according to the NQF's rules, based on content composition and the primary disciplinary emphasis. For example:

- *MS in Information Technology (with Business Analytics)*
- *MS in Computing and Management Science*
- *MS in IT with Statistical Modeling*
- viii. **Include deficiency or bridging courses** for students from non-primary-discipline backgrounds, in line with GEP-2023 provisions.
- ix. **Seek HEC’s NOC** before launching the program, following the prescribed procedure.
- x. **Admit students through a special admission track** that specifies eligibility criteria for those from allied fields.

This approach allows universities to expand access while maintaining compliance with HEC policies, ensuring that program design reflects both the primary discipline and the diverse academic backgrounds of admitted students.

**3.2 (footnote 5)-1 – Is the use of UNESCO ISCED classification mandatory for universities under the Graduate Education Policy?**

- a. Yes, but solely for the purpose of assessing eligibility for admissions within one of the ten broader disciplines defined by ISCED-F-2013.

**3.2 (footnote 5)-2 – How to determine an inter-disciplinary admission?**

- b. The ISCED-F-2013 classify educational fields into three level: i-Broader Field, ii-Narrow Field, and iii-Detailed Filed. Application of Intra-disciplinary, as defined by GEP-2023, may be determined as follows:
  - i. GEP-2023 does not allow interdisciplinary admissions from one Broader Field to another Broader Field.
  - ii. However, Intra-disciplinary admissions i.e. among Narrow Fields lying within one Broader Field are allowed. GEP-2023 applies here and requires applying the conditions prescribed under clause 3.2.
  - iii. But the GEP-2023 does not essentially require applying the requirements of clause 3.2 at third level of classification i.e. cross-disciplinary admissions among Detailed Fields lying within a Narrow Field.

**3.2 (footnote 5)-3 – Can universities use a different classification system than ISCED-F-2013?**

- a. The HEC, vide its email dated October 30, 2020, addressing all Vice Chancellors requires all HEIs to adopt ISCED-F-2013 in assessing degree titles, and structure of academic programs. Therefore, unless withdrawal of this email, the HEIs cannot.

**3.2 (footnote 5)-4 – Does ISCED-F-2013 provide classifications for all academic fields?**

- a. No. However, ISCED-F-2013 suggests an eleventh category named “Field Unknown”. Therefore, when universities find certain emerging fields that have not yet classified under 10 broader classified areas, they can classify the new fields appropriately either under “field unknown” or within the 10 broader classifications.

**3.2(iii)&3.4 – Does a prospective graduate student with an intra-disciplinary background need to take two admission tests i.e., GRE/HAT General and GRE Subject or only GRE Subject is enough?**

- a. GRE Subject test is an additional requirement for a prospective student intending to MS/MPhil or PhD from an Intra-disciplinary field, while GRE/HAT General or Equivalent is a fundamental requirement for each student aiming to gain admission in a graduate degree program. Hence, a prospective graduate student coming from an Intra-disciplinary field must take two tests i.e., the GRE Subject and GRE/HAT General / Equivalent.

**3.4(a-ii) – Can a University/HEI accept an admission test conducted by National Testing Service (NTS)?**

- a. Yes, provided that the HEC would have accredited the NTS as a body corporate authorized to conduct tests for admissions to the graduate programs in Pakistani HEIs.

**3.9.i(a-i) – While choosing an external evaluator from the top 500 universities ranked by the THE or QS World Ranking, whether the evaluator be chosen from General/Institutional Ranking, or from program-level ranking?**

- a. Clause 3.9 of GEP-2023 requires selecting a foreign evaluator from the specified international Ranking. However, when it comes to choosing between program-level rankings and university-level rankings by TIMES or QS, the university may evaluate both options and select the one that best fits their specific context and goals.

**3.9(ii-f) – Can a PhD student request a change of external thesis evaluator due to non-responsiveness? If so, what procedure should be followed?**

- a. Clause 3.9(ii-f) of the GEP (2023) states that an HEI should assign an external evaluator who has time and availability to review the dissertation. Therefore, in case an external review is getting too late, a student may request the university to contact the evaluator, asking for their availability and time to review the dissertation, and request the university to change the external evaluator if the existing evaluator is not available.

**3.10(e) – Can a final Open Defense of a PhD student be conducted through online mode?**

- a. Clause 3.10(e) of GEP-2023 embarks on some minimum principles/guidelines that must be adhered to before conducting an Open Defense of a PhD student in letter and spirit. The HEIs are required to ensure implementation of the guiding principles before conducting an Open Defense, irrespective of the mode that may be decided per the context.

**3.10(e-iii) – What does the term “Neutral Chair” mean in process of conducting Open Defense?**

- a. It means the HEI shall designate a high-ranked person (as determined by the HEI) to chair the process of final Open Defense of a PhD student. Such a person must be neutral/unbiased, have no conflict interest with the HEI, and/or student, and shall also oversee the process impartially ensuring that the Open Defense is conducted fairly and in accordance with rules and regulations.

**3.10(e) – What is the procedure of conducting viva of a PhD students and evaluating their theses?**

- a. Developing operational procedures is a contextual matter to be performed within the HEIs. The Higher Education Commission, being the regulatory body, aims to provide a common framework, broader guidelines, and minimum standards for enhancing the quality and relevance of graduate education and research in the country. The universities are free to develop their own regulations according to their respective Charters, own needs, and contexts as long as they comply with the minimum standards and criteria set by the HEC.

**3.10-2 – Can the Open Defense of a PhD student be conducted before thesis evaluation?**

- a. Clause 3.10(e) of the Graduate Education Policy 2023 (GEP-2023) delineates that a PhD student can request an open defense after positive evaluation by the committee members.

**3.11(i-b) – Do the “Social Science Disciplines” include “Arts and Humanities”, “Languages”, and “Business Education”?**

- a. Yes, for the purpose of application of clause 3.11(i.b) of the GEP-2023, the term “Social Science Disciplines” encompasses all disciplines other than the “Science Disciplines”.

**3.11(footnote 12)-1 – Under the revised HJRS categorization, which category would be applicable to a research article for academic recognition if the categorization changes after the article has been accepted by a research journal?**

- a. Clause 3.11(footnote 12) of the GEP-2023 allows accepting the category of HJRS that occurs at the time of acceptance of an article in a research journal.

**3.11(footnote 12)-2 – Which category of HJRS should be considered for academic recognition if a research article is accepted or published in a journal categorized differently by HJRS in more than one domain?**

- a. Clause 3.11(v) requires publishing articles in a relevant research journal as determined and categorized in HJRS. Hence, research articles shall be accepted for academic recognition in accordance with the relevancy and category of the journal determined by HJRS at the time of acceptance of a research article.

**3.11-2 – Can a PhD student specializing in a language literature/linguistics can publish research in another language or otherwise?**

- a. The Graduate Education Policy 2023 is open to use of language in writing or making publications. However, the decision of the university/relevant authority should be guided by the nature of the research, the intended audience, and institutional requirements, and the student's academic goals. It is advisable for the university to discuss these considerations at their relevant statutory forums and decide.

**3.11-3 – What is the sequence for research article publication in relation to the evaluation of a PhD dissertation and the open defense during a PhD process?**

- a. Clause 3.11 of the 'Graduate Education Policy-2023 (GEP-2023) does not explicitly specify the order of fulfilling the publication requirement concerning the external evaluation and the final defense. However, it does mention that a PhD student must publish research articles, after approval of the research synopsis/proposal, in the HEC's recognized research journals.

**3.12 – what can be the maximum length/duration to obtain a PhD degree?**

- a. According to the GEP-2023, normally the maximum length or duration to obtain a PhD degree is eight years or 16 regular semesters, unless there are exceptional circumstances beyond the control of the student. This is stated in section 3.12 of the policy, which also outlines the procedure for requesting an extension in case of force majeure.

**3.12(iv) – what can be the maximum length/duration to obtain a PhD degree in the event of force majeure?**

- a. Clause 2.3(iv) of the said policy does not specify any maximum limit in the event of force majeure and allows HEIs to grant an extension in the period of award of PhD degree following the mprocedure provided in the referred clause and keeping in view the duration limiting factor(s). The policy also requires HEIs to take corrective measures in case the delay is caused due to process or administrative reasons.

**3.13(i) – Can an HEI, when permitting a graduate student to resume or continue a previously enrolled degree program after becoming dormant or time-barred, allow the transfer or exemption of credit hours previously earned toward that degree from the same university?**

- a. Clause 3.13(i) of the Graduate Education Policy 2023 (GEP-2023) stipulates that the credit transfer facility from one university to another, shall also apply to Level 8-degree programs, as outlined in HEC's Uniform Semester Guidelines. However, it does not specifically address Intra-university transfer of credit hours (CH). Nevertheless, it is implied that Intra-university CH transfer/exemption can be exercised more easily due to the consistency in academic standards, course content, and internal administrative procedures within the same institution.

## **Section-4:**

**4.2.1(ix) – What is the maximum limit of co-supervision for a PhD faculty member?**

- a. Co-supervisors are opted/assigned to provide additional guidance to PhD students during their PhD research. They bring diverse experience and enhance collaborative learning and networking opportunities, mitigate risks associated with unforeseen challenges by helping to improve the research quality, and reduce workload of the principal supervisor. Therefore, clause 4.2.3(ii) of GEP-2023 provides for allocating co-supervisors to a PhD student through a Supervisory Committee.

- b. Assigning PhD faculty members to co-supervision of PhD researchers will increase their workload that shall be determined based on the nature of the institution, availability of teaching and research facilities, and the academic standing of PhD faculty members. The GEP-2023 prescribes no limit on their co-supervision.

#### **4.2.2 – Do PhD faculty members need HEC’s approval to be a PhD Supervisor?**

- a. No. Per the GEP-2023, PhD faculty members do not need HEC’s approval to be a PhD supervisor, if they meet the general (including professional abilities) and specific requirements (including academic and research qualifications) outlined in the policy.

#### **4.2.2 (footnote 14)-1 – Are the HEC’s approved PhD supervisors, approved prior to the implementation of GEP-2023, required to fulfill the 'Criteria to be a PhD Supervisor' outlined within the new policy?**

- a. Yes, after the expiry of their award letters issued by HEC, they must meet the criteria provided under clause 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 of GEP-2023 to supervise a PhD student enrolled after the promulgation of GEP-2023. However, according to footnote 14 of GEP-2023, the HEC’s approved PhD supervisors shall remain approved until the date mentioned on their award letter.

#### **4.2.2 (footnote 14)-2 – Can the PhD faculty members, who were HEC’s approved supervisors prior to the promulgation of GEP-2023, continue to supervise their existing PhD students, even after the expiry of their award letters and without fulfilling the new criteria prescribed in GEP-2023?**

- a. Yes, they can because the previous policies and notifications would continue to be effective on previous students, so is the matter of supervisory criteria. However, to supervise new PhD students enrolled after the promulgation of GEP-2023, the PhD faculty members must meet the criteria provided under clause 4.2.1 and 4.2.2 of GEP-2023 to supervise PhD students.

#### **4.2.2(i-b) – According to GEP-2023, newly appointed PhD faculty members and HEC-approved supervisors with expired HEC approvals are required to undergo training through NAHE, MOOCs, or at HEIs. If a university nominates some faculty members for online MOOCs training covering all relevant content specified in GEP-2023, would these faculty members then be eligible to serve as Master Trainers to support the training of other faculty members in achieving approved supervisor status?**

- a. Yes, the university may train its faculty as a Master Trainer for the rest of the faculty members to fulfill the requirements delineated in clause 4.2.2-i(b) of the GEP-2023.

#### **4.3-1 – When universities have their own established system of looking after researching related matter (MPhil/PhD), why there is separate body like DASR as provided in clause 4.3 of the policy. Shouldn't it be left for the universities?**

- a. Yes, the universities can use any name, as provided in their respective Charters, for the department and the body which have been entrusted to look after the matters of graduate studies and research within the university. The GEP-2023 does not compulsory prescribe using the term DASR.
- b. Further, the policy does not intend to undermine the autonomy of the universities or their established systems of research management. Rather, it aims to provide a common framework, broader guidelines, and minimum standards for enhancing the quality and relevance of graduate education and research in the country. Universities are free to adopt or adapt the policy according to their respective Charters, own needs, and contexts if they comply with the minimum standards and criteria set by the HEC.

**4.3-2 – What are the role and powers of the Directorate of Advance Studies and Research (DASR)/equivalent body for granting extension in maximum duration of obtaining an MS/MPhil degree as delineated at 2.3 of GEP-2023?**

- a. Clause 4.3.ii of GEP-2023 requires the Directorate of Advance Study (DAS) / Equivalent Department to act as Secretariat of Board of Advance Studies (BASR) / Equivalent Body which is responsible for the overall quality of graduate programs in an HEI/DAI. Hence, DASR/equivalent department being secretariat of BASR/equivalent body is to coordinate for all the matters relating to quality of graduate programs, but not to make decisions upon.
- b. Therefore, the DASR/Equivalent body cannot decide on matters of graduate studies, including the matter of granting extension in maximum duration of a degree program. But rather, the directorate is required to place such requests before BASR/equivalent body with the approval of university's competent authority and seek decision. (*Ref. No: AD-III/QAD/Policy Clarifications/2024-P-001 / Subject: MS/MPhil and PhD Policy Clarifications*)

**4.4-2 – Can Director Advance Studies, Director QA&E or Director ORIC be counted as regular faculty members for the compliance of NOCs of graduate programs?**

- a. Clause 7.1.1(a) of GEP-2023 requires full-time faculty members to launch a graduate degree program. An individual working as Director QA&E, or Director ORIC cannot be a full-time faculty member and, hence, cannot be counted towards fulfilling the minimum faculty requirements to launch a graduate degree program.

**Section-7:**

**7.1.2 – Can the ISCED classification be used to determine relevance of faculty with subject/degree program?**

- a. GEP-2023 refers to ISCED-F-2013 to define intradisciplinary qualifications solely to determine admission eligibility for a student having different qualification background. However, the said classification may also refer to determining supervisor/faculty relevance to program/research using it as a reference for understanding the scope of disciplines and sub-disciplines.