



# Higher Education Standards Panel

## Communique Number 9 – September 2013

### Introduction

Welcome to the ninth Communique from the Higher Education Standards Panel (the Panel). The purpose of this Communique is to respond to feedback received from stakeholders on the proposed standards for Research, Research Training and Learning Outcomes (Research) that are part of the revision of the Higher Education Standards Framework.

The Panel received 71 responses to Call for Comment No. 2 with the majority of respondents indicating broad support for the draft standards. The Panel has continued to refine the draft standards in light of the comments received, noting the issues raised by stakeholders. Some of the issues raised in the submissions are discussed below; others are still being considered by the Panel.

### Issues raised in submissions

#### Inclusion of research standards in the current Threshold Standards

As the Panel noted in Communique 4, the Threshold Standards of the current Higher Education Standards Framework include several standards statements relating to research and research training, although they are not explicitly identified as ‘research standards’. There are examples in the Provider Registration, Provider Category, Course Accreditation and Qualification Standards. The focus of the current research-related standards is somewhat dispersed and they do not address the research environment, research training and the learning outcomes of research training in a consistent manner.

#### Need for Research Standards

A small number of stakeholders questioned the need for research standards given the competitive nature of the research sector, the existing requirements of funding agencies such as the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Australian Research Council, and the accreditation requirements of professional bodies. The Panel notes that there are many higher education providers who are highly experienced in research management and, as stated by many respondents, these experienced providers currently exceed the requirements of the proposed standards. However, research takes place in a variety of other settings, it is not always publicly funded and does not need to comply with the requirements of granting bodies that impose stringent requirements e.g. the Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research.

In these circumstances the Panel believes that the sector should be subject to a minimum set of standards for all providers who undertake research. The Panel also believes that research training should take place in an active research environment, a view widely supported in feedback from the sector. Research standards will provide a minimum foundation for a research training environment where this is not otherwise established. The Panel proposes to continue with the development of research standards, while noting feedback from the sector on their content and remaining conscious of regulatory burden. The Panel sees the research standards as being applicable to any provider who conducts research irrespective of the purpose (i.e. whether as stand-alone research or accompanied by research training).

#### Application of Research Training Standards

A number of stakeholders commented on the prospective application of the Standards for Research Training, particularly whether they might apply to Bachelor (Honours) degrees. The Panel’s intention is that the proposed Research Training Standards would only apply to higher degrees by research i.e.

higher degrees where research makes up two thirds of the course of study. Where research is a lesser component of a course of study, e.g. Bachelor (Honours), the proposed Research Standards would still apply to any research undertaken, such as a minor project, but the Research Training Standards would not apply. Courses of study with a minor component of research or research-related studies would be covered by the standards that apply to coursework such as Course Design, Learning Outcomes etc.

### **'Research Active'**

The current standards require supervisors to be 'actively carrying out research and publishing in the relevant discipline area'. The Panel had felt that it would be useful for the research standards to require an institutional definition of 'research active'. Stakeholders raised many issues with this proposal and the Panel has decided not to proceed with this proposal in the research standards, but will reconsider its applicability in the research training standards, particularly for supervision.

### **Supervision**

A number of stakeholders raised issues about the proposed requirements for supervision including the employment status and number of supervisors. The Panel is keen to maintain the accountability of providers in the training of research students and as such will include a requirement that at least one supervisor is a member of staff of the provider (or otherwise contracted for supervisory duties). Similarly, the Panel has noted comments on the unintended consequence of the supervision requirements for undergraduate degrees with a research component and proposes to exempt undergraduate degrees from the Research Training Standard.

### **Learning Outcomes**

As heralded by the Panel in Call for Comment Number 2, the Panel believes that the learning outcomes specified in the draft Standards for Research Training could be incorporated into a combined set of standards that cover learning outcomes (and their assessment) for both coursework and research training. The Panel is proceeding with this approach in the interests of streamlining the standards, informed by the specific feedback obtained from Calls for Comment Numbers 1 & 2.

### **Reporting on Research Performance**

A number of stakeholders commented on references to reporting on research performance. Some respondents interpreted the standards to do with reporting as standards for reporting individual research performance. This was not the Panel's intention. In any case the Panel agrees that analysis and reporting of research performance, while desirable and likely to be mandated in many settings, is not essential in a minimum set of higher education standards for regulation.

### **'Process' standards**

Several respondents suggested that some standards over-emphasised processes rather than outcomes. These comments will be considered in redrafting the standards.

### **Other matters**

A minority of feedback raised concerns about the reference to original contributions to the field of research made by research students. The Panel notes that the current Provider Category Standards include the same requirement where research is undertaken and believes this requirement should continue, albeit potentially redrafted. Several respondents also suggested additional standards to be included and these are being considered by the Panel.

## **Providing Feedback to the Panel**

If you wish to provide feedback on any matter raised in this or any other communique, or on other matters to do with developing standards, the Panel can be contacted at any time via the Higher Education Standards Executive at:

**EMAIL ADDRESS**      [info@HEstandards.gov.au](mailto:info@HEstandards.gov.au)

**WEBSITE**              <http://www.HEstandards.gov.au>

The Panel is grateful for the cooperation and support it has received to date and looks forward to continuing to engage with the sector and other stakeholders.

Alan Robson  
Chair  
Higher Education Standards Panel  
September 2013

### **Distribution of Communiques**

It would be helpful if the existing addressees of the Panel's communiques could look to passing the communiques on to interested parties within their constituencies. Anyone who wishes to be added to the distribution list can contact the email address above. Copies of communiques will be uploaded to the Panel's website as soon as practicable after distribution.