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## Higher Education Standards Panel Consultation

### Draft Standards for Research, Research Training, Learning Outcomes (Research Training)

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The University appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Research related draft standards. We reiterate our broad support for the format of the standards.

#### 1. Draft Standards for Research

*Q1. Do you broadly support the proposed standards for Research? If not, why?*

The proposed standards for the most part describe systems and practices that are already in place at La Trobe University. As a result, there is broad support for the standards among staff involved in research and research supervision.

*Q2. Do you wish to make any suggestions in relation to the specific content of the standards?*

Point 3 refers to formal induction of research staff. Our interpretation is that this is intended to relate to the induction of new and early-career researchers into their roles.

More broadly, these standards focus on processes and inputs to the research function. While not having particular suggestions, we suggest that the Panel consider whether there are appropriate and measurable standards related to research outcomes.

#### 2. Draft Standards for Research Training

*Q3. Do you broadly support the proposed standards for Research Training? If not, why?*

Yes

*Q4. Do you wish to make any suggestions in relation to the specific content of the standards?*

While broadly supporting the draft standards, the University notes that operationalising and implementing some of them is not straightforward. For example, we contend that there is not necessarily always a strong relationship between quality of supervision and the quality of dissertation as assessed by examiners' reports (item 8b). Sometimes, it is the best supervisors who are able to help weak or disadvantaged students get their work up to a passable standard. We contend that it would be dangerous to draw conclusions about supervisor quality by reference to examination outcomes.

On Item 2, our understanding of this standard is that it is not to require the inclusion of coursework subjects in all research degrees, but that any coursework that is included should comply with the same quality assurance arrangements as other subjects in the University including the specification of learning outcomes. The University supports this approach.

On item 7, there is some concern over whether the proposed review of examiners' reports is intended to be internal or external. The University believes that external reviews would not be the most cost-effective means for an institution to assure the quality of research of its HDR candidates.

### **3. Draft Standards for Learning Outcomes (Research)**

*Q5. Do you broadly support the proposed standards for Learning Outcomes (Research Training)? If not, why?*

The University supports the specification of learning outcomes for all courses of study including research degrees. However these standards are the focus of some disagreement within the institution. Exactly how they will be specified and measured for research degrees has raised concern in some quarters that departments/disciplines will be required to provide specific discipline knowledge based descriptions of learning outcomes for individual research degrees, and that the measurement of these will add extra assessment duties for research staff.

For research degrees at masters and doctoral levels, the University considers the specification of University-wide generic skills outcomes for the awards at each level would be more appropriate than knowledge-based outcomes for individual awards.

*Q6. Do you wish to make any suggestions in relation to the specific content of the standards?*  
Item 3 provides a list of generic learning outcomes that would be expected at a level appropriate to the research qualification. The issue was raised, especially in the technical and scientific disciplines, that some of these generic learning outcomes might not be specifically covered during the completion of the research project and the production of a dissertation. Attempting to train candidates and assess their achievements in a range of skills beyond the dissertation might detract from the focus on the research itself. Hence this statement of learning outcomes should align to what can be achieved through the conduct of a research project and production of a thesis. Otherwise, is it anticipated that candidates for master's and doctoral degrees would have a reduction in the thesis length in proportion to the amount of generic, presentational and other skills training they have been required to undertake. Some flexibility is required over this item to take account of the different demands that research education and development involve in different disciplines.

On item 4, the practice of having external examiners for research degrees is supported .

*Q7. Do you wish to make any **Overall or General Comments** about the form, style, scope or any other aspects of the proposed set of research-related standards?*

While the University has no specific proposal for how to incorporate this consideration into a standard, we do note with concern the high rate of withdrawal and failure to complete programs of higher degrees by research across the sector. While attrition is mentioned in passing (Research Training, item 8), we wonder whether a standard can be formulated in respect of early confirmation of candidature or other early warning system, so that people who are experiencing difficulties can be identified, supported and, if necessary, enabled to find an alternate exit path.

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Yours sincerely,

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