

## **UWA response to HESP Call for Comment June 2013**

The University of Western Australia thanks the HESP for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Draft Standards for Research, Research Training and Learning Outcomes (Research Training). Our responses to the seven questions raised in the paper are set out below.

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

Yes, the University of Western Australia broadly supports the proposed standards for Research.

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

Broad internal discussion of the paper within UWA has focused on the question of definition of 'research active' staff. The draft standards make clear the view of the Panel that the development of a definition is the responsibility of the institution. Nevertheless, there is some concern that the lack of an explicit 'threshold standard' definition of 'research active' staff will not provide a sufficiently strong constraint on the Research Training standards as these might be applied across the sector (see response to Q.4 below).

The relevant draft standard reads as follows:

*4. The concept of 'research-active' staff is defined and complied with in the implementation of research policy and practices.*

We suggest that some guidance on what such a definition might include would strengthen the standards. For example, the draft standard might be rewritten along the following lines:

*4. The concept of 'research-active' staff is defined — making reference to peer reviewed publications, competitive funding and/or impacts/knowledge exchange — and is complied with in the implementation of research policy and practices.*

*Excellence in Research for Australia* can provide a reference point for this standard also. For example, an institution might describe research active staff as those who have produced work that can be included in an ERA return.

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

Yes, the University of Western Australia broadly supports the proposed standards for Research Training.

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

The set of standards do not make specific reference to the environment in which the research training occurs, other than to require that the Principal Research Supervisor be 'research active'. In the absence of a (threshold) standard definition of 'research active staff' we see some risk that the overall standards proposed for research training are not as robust as they should be.

It is noted in the Discussion Paper that (pg.3):

*The Panel sees research training as being part of an active research context. Consequently, the draft Standards for Research Training presuppose that the provider conducts research in the field in which research training is offered and meets the Standards for Research as a pre-requisite for offering research training.*

The paper also recognizes (pg.2) that, “research training is critically dependent on a culture and context of research activity, without which research training should not be contemplated.”

While the proposed standards for Research are designed to ensure adequate governance and quality assurance procedures for the conduct of research, no standards are proposed that would allow for a testing of the ‘presupposition’ that Research Training is occurring “only in fields where the provider has sufficient capability, resources and infrastructure for the field of research and proposed candidatures” (pg. 2).

Thus we suggest that the Panel consider addressing this specifically. Options for revision might involve one or other of:

1. The addition of a further standard for Research Training that specifically addresses the broader research training environment, for example;
  - x. *Research training is conducted in fields where the provider has sufficient capability, resources and infrastructure for the field of research and proposed candidatures.*
  
2. Amendment of the proposed standard 1a. to make reference to aspects of research environment that go beyond the expertise of supervisors and the availability of resources, for example;
  1. *Research training is conducted in accordance with the provider’s academic governance requirements for research training, encompassing:*
    - a. *requirements for admission and approval of candidature that take into account the preparedness of the candidate, the availability of qualified, competent and accessible supervision, the resources necessary for the candidature, **and the quality of the research environment in the specific field(s) in which the candidature will be conducted.***

An appropriate additional Reference Point for these standards would then be *Excellence in Research for Australia*.

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

Yes, the University of Western Australia broadly supports the proposed standards for Learning Outcomes (Research Training).

**Q6. Do you wish to make any suggestions in relation to the specific content of the standards?**

Proposed standard 3 lists a number of outcomes but omits reference to original research, which we believe is an important outcome of research degrees. We suggest that the Panel consider including

an additional point under 3 along the following lines:

*3. On completion of research training, candidates will have demonstrated, at a level consistent with the qualification awarded:*

...

*x. the capacity to make original contributions to knowledge*

The proposed standards for the assessment of Research Training courses remain vague and open to alternative interpretations. It is thus not perfectly clear what the Panel has in mind here. The relevant proposed standard reads as follows:

*4. Assessment of theses, dissertations, exegeses, creative works or other major assessable research outputs and materials is undertaken:*

*a. for doctoral degrees, by at least two independent experts with international standing who are external to the provider and any collaborating institution involved in the work, ...*

4a. admits of two interpretations: 1) there must be at least two independent examiners, all of whom are external to the provider and any collaborating institution involved in the work ..., 2) of the examiners, at least two are external to the provider; e.g., of three, one may be 'independent' but internal to the provider or a collaborating institution.

Our current practice with respect to HDR programs taught entirely by UWA aligns with the first interpretation. This is consistent with the current guidelines on HDR examination endorsed by the Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Schools (DDoGS).

However, having said that, in the negotiation of *cotutelle* examination arrangements with some European collaborating institutions it has been necessary for UWA to approve examination processes involving the addition of an examiner independent of the project but who is a member of staff of the collaborating institution, in line with the formal processes of that partner institution. This is consistent with the second reading of 4a. Our preference is to allow the second interpretation only in the exceptional circumstances occasioned by cross-sector collaboration. It may be that the Panel has considered such arrangements and has intentionally left open this possibility.

We believe some clarification on this point is necessary.

***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?***

UWA is very supportive of the approach taken in the development of these proposed standards. In particular, the standards present very clear thresholds without being overly prescriptive.

Some of the proposed standards, specifically the Learning Outcomes (Research Training), will challenge the sector to review the way in which much current Research Training is conducted, and this is a welcome challenge. For example, it is clear that not all the elements listed under point 3 can necessarily be achieved for all candidates through a research project culminating in an assessed thesis. This is especially the case for 3e. The draft standards thus go beyond a codification of the *status quo* and seek to address wider community expectations of Research Training.