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Dear Professor Robson,

Call for comment (Number 2, May 2013)
Draft Standards for Research, Research Training and Learning Outcomes (Research Training)

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on the proposed draft standards on Research, Research Training and Learning Outcomes (Research Training). The Australian Business Dean's Council (ABDC) and its representative group for research, Business Academics Research Directors Network (BARDSNet), has a long-established interest in promoting higher quality in research and research training across all relevant business disciplines. This complements the extensive track record of the ABDC in supporting the development of academic standards for business education, which reflect international best practice. ABDC activities are also complemented by the intensive accreditation processes of multiple international management and business education organisations, which typically includes research and research training as part of the assessment process.¹ While not all Australian business schools are accredited by such bodies (nor do they necessarily seek accreditation) those that are accredited already undergo an intensive standards-based assessment and so any development of Australian standards should give consideration to how such a process might be seen as a practical demonstration of research and research training quality.

The ABDC and BARDSNet propose that any revised threshold standards should satisfy three key conditions. First, they must not in any way restrict the ability of Australian business schools to offer higher degree by research (HDR-primarily PhD) training that is internationally competitive. Recent moves to offer cross-university programs which maximise the opportunity to offer genuinely world-class entire doctoral programs (given scarce talent across sub-disciplines) is one such example. Second, standards should not impede innovation in research or research training. Indeed, research is itself premised on innovation, in identifying research questions and also the appropriate means by which to address them. Third, standards developed by HESP should not prevent compliance with requirements of major international accrediting bodies such as the AACSB, which currently approves for membership leading business schools globally as well as an increasing number of Australian business schools. The ABDC would not want to see standards which effectively contradict internationally recognised best practice.

We support the distinction outlined in the Discussion Paper which separates Research and Research Training. It is increasingly evident that to equip research students to conduct research, more than

¹ Examples include the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB) and the quality assurance arm of the European Foundation for Management development (EQUIS).

just informal processes are required. This has long been recognised by world-leading Business Schools (particularly in the US) and is increasingly accepted in Australia and elsewhere. While the “Guiding Principles” outlined on page 1 of the Discussion Paper recognise that it is not intended “to preclude a mix of coursework and research training in practice” we would note that several of our member institutions have recently launched doctoral education “frameworks,” which give greater explicit recognition to coursework as part of doctoral training. Current practice among our members is diverse, and so it is important that standards reflect variations in approaches to doctoral education and training. Such variation is likely to reflect a relatively healthy “market” in such activity.

Moreover, we are struck by the way in which the promulgation of standards for Learning Outcomes, as well as Research Training more broadly, appear to explicitly require certain types of activity, which most likely reflect various forms of formal coursework activity. We believe it is essential that any substantive “Research Training” standards should reflect the need for Australian business schools to be competitive internationally in their PhD program offerings. At present the 3 year (or at best, 3.5 year) funding model under APA and equivalent support schemes is itself a practical limitation on what can be achieved. Hence, we would encourage the Higher Education Standards Panel to carefully frame its standards within the context of the current 3/3.5 year funding model, which is typically less time than is taken for PhD completion in leading business schools in the US and Europe.

While we support the use of ERA reports as a potential means of demonstrating achievement, we do so more as a recognition of the enormous financial and time costs involved in this process than anything else. For FoRs 14 and 15 (i.e. those that form the basis of virtually all business research), the last ERA (2012) relied on a peer-review process on which the ABDC has already commented extensively, most notably the extensive power given to expert panel members relative to peer reviewers. While we support the intention that demonstrable research activity should be a precursor to a satisfactory Research Training environment, we also note that in many cases excellence can occur in relatively small pockets, which are not recognised in ERA-type processes. Hence, we prefer that demonstration of an appropriate level of research activity not be premised on some minimum amount of outputs, but rather the quality of the research as demonstrated by the institution itself. Finally, we note that the ABDC has, as an organisation, invested significant resources in our own ranked output list, the details of which are available from the ABDC website.

Turning to the individual Draft Standards, we offer the following comments:

Research

We support the inclusion of Research Active as a basis for identification of staff appropriate to supervise research activity, although we believe that the definition of such and its application should ultimately be university-specific.

We query the need to have as a standard a requirement that research be analysed and monitored and assessed for improvement. This would seem to be a fundamental imperative for any institution conducting research in a competitive higher education environment.

Research Training

While we support the outlining of minimum standards for Research Training, we wonder how “separable” Learning Outcomes (and their demonstration) really are from the research itself. We are particularly concerned that the Draft Standard maintains the assumption that doctoral research should show “evidence of a significant original contribution to the field of research.” This is a very big statement, and arguably is not a requirement to meet the Learning Outcomes themselves in the Draft Learning Outcomes Standard. How one demonstrates a significant original contribution is undefined, and it is noteworthy that the expectation of PhD students from the world’s leading research-focussed Business Schools is typically more in line with the Learning Outcomes listed under the draft Learning Outcomes Standard than the achievement of any “significant advance.” This reflects some tension between the view of a PhD as a learning/training exercise to pursue research versus one that itself results in significant knowledge advances.

Learning Outcomes (Research Training)

We support the listing of generic learning outcomes, but suggest that they could be incorporated into research training as part of a necessary standard of activity. We note that assessment by external experts, while the norm for Australian Business Schools, is not accepted practice at top US Business Schools, where examination is internal. While the majority of our members support a requirement of at least two external examiners, at least some Australian business schools believe that a choice should be available. As external examiners are appointed by an “internal” process, the broad credibility of such a process is inevitably tied to the likely standing of the examiners acceptable to different universities. This at least raises the question of how university-selected external examiners are different from the university choosing to either accept or reject the research work as being of the necessary standard. Nevertheless, we note that the majority of members who responded to the distribution of the draft standards expressed support for mandatory external examination, at least for PhD theses if not for Masters’ theses.

Please do not hesitate to contact me or Professor Stephen Taylor (Chair of BARDSNet, [_____](#)) should you wish to clarify any of the issues raised.

Yours sincerely

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