

# Review of the Higher Education Provider Category Standards

## A submission to the review

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### Executive summary

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the review of the Higher Education Provider Category Standards. The following comments are based on experience in universities and in the independent higher education sector. In particular, as Convenor of the Chairs of Academic Boards Forum (CABF), I have consulted the CABF Steering Committee and acknowledge the helpful feedback from this group. Please note that while the CABF loosely represents independent higher education providers, these providers are a very diverse collection of institutions and its members have a correspondingly wide range of views not all of which can be represented here.

The following comments raise some dilemmas in the current framework and suggest some options which I hope the Review Panel will consider.

This submission is organised around the three broad questions identified by the Review Panel:

- What characteristics define a “higher education provider” and a “university”?
- What categories are needed?
- What are the benefits of the suggested changes?

There are many types of quality providers. The current standards which recognise universities (large multi-purpose teaching and research institutions) and non-universities (all the rest) are inadequate.

The Higher Education Provider Category Standards should be framed to provide opportunities for a diverse higher education sector, rather than as a barrier to university status. This requires transparent criteria and procedures for higher education providers to achieve self-accrediting status and university status. The pathways should acknowledge and assist the different types of providers. To provide this information should serve as a powerful incentive for high quality providers to be rewarded for their effort, achievements and standards. This can only contribute to the international reputation of the higher education sector in Australia, already an industry of major significance to the Australian economy.

Benefits can be expected from recognising a wider range of provider types and facilitating pathways for development. They include healthy innovation and diversity and more meaningful indicators for benchmarking.

## **Higher Education Provider**

A Higher Education Provider is defined by Part A of the Higher Education Standards administered by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency.

The way in which the standards are framed requires continuing compliance with all the standards at all times.

On this basis, no further definition of “higher education provider” can be required. The criteria in Section B1.1 of the Higher Education Standards are included in Part A. These criteria do not appear to define or characterise a “higher education provider” by themselves.

Currently, the only distinctions between types of providers in the Threshold Standards involves research and research training. However, there are many types of Higher Education Providers whose distinctive scope is ignored. For example, it should be possible to identify pathway colleges, undergraduate colleges, continuing professional education colleges, etc. within the broad category of Higher Education Provider.

While the Provider Standards appear to suggest that only some standards are considered for registration and TEQSA indicates that it uses a core plus approach in requesting evidence, in practice TEQSA may require evidence of any and all standards at any time and apply any and all of them to a Higher Education Provider regardless of its scope (except for research).

The burden of regulation encompassed in Part A requires review so that the processes of registration and re-registration are genuinely based on core standards and the scope of evidence to be considered is limited to what is required in the light of the provider’s circumstances.

If this were done, it could lead to subsets of standards which do characterise particular types of higher education providers and provide relevant and transparent tests of their quality.

## **Self-accrediting status**

Some Higher Education Providers achieve higher status by accumulating merit with TEQSA by demonstrating sustained compliance with the Higher Education Standards. Limited self-accreditation requires demonstration of quality assurance to TEQSA’s satisfaction in relation to re-accreditation of existing courses. In practice, this means that a course must go through a cycle of re-accreditation before even limited self-accreditation can be considered. There do not seem to be explicit criteria on which TEQSA’s confidence can be predicted.

The criteria in Section B2.2 and B2.3 repeat certain of the Standards from Part A.

If accreditation and registration could be based on a smaller set of genuine core standards, then it may be possible and reasonable to specify additional core standards for determining self-accreditation. This would have the advantage of allowing a provider to apply at any time for self-accrediting status. This must surely be possible in the same way as it should be possible to set up a greenfields university.

While registration and accreditation continue to admit all the applicable Threshold Standards in Table 1 of the Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2015, there is no room for setting additional hurdles other than good behaviour over time. This seems to imply that a new provider, no matter how meritorious, cannot achieve any status above the basic approval as a higher education provider. This is surely untenable.

Nevertheless, if the current rules and standards are retained, self-accrediting status should simply follow based on successful renewal of registration. There is no need for a separate process.

On the basis of the current rules and standards and given that TEQSA has control of registration and accreditation and requires compliance with all the standards including quality assurance of accreditation and re-accreditation, course development and review, it also means that TEQSA could rely on re-registration to demonstrate capacity for self-accreditation and any limits on self-accreditation that are needed. In this scenario, there is therefore no need to set criteria for self-accrediting status.

Further, on the current rules, once a higher education provider had self-accrediting status in, say, three fields of study it could be granted full self-accrediting status. This seems to be all that is required of universities.

### **University status**

Section B1.2 sets out the criteria for recognition as a university. The main features are self-accrediting status across a range of courses for at least 5 years, commitment and breadth in research, dissemination of good practice in teaching, extensive range of student services, engagement with its community and support of the relevant government.

*Self-accrediting status.* The reference to self-accrediting status seems to be circular. University status confers self-accrediting status.

*Research.* According to the discussion paper, a university is a place for teaching and research. “These two fundamental features . . . have contributed to the good reputation of Australia’s universities internationally for high quality teaching and research” [Discussion Paper, page 11].

While the teaching-research nexus has support, it does not seem possible to provide really convincing evidence to justify it. “Australia has come to conceptualise universities as places for both teaching and research” [Discussion Paper, page 11]. The discussion paper also suggests that the research requirement is loosely framed.

Our current universities are not homogeneous. They may include “teaching-only” units and “teaching-only” staff. Research institutes are often separate from teaching units. In other words, there is considerable variation in research culture which is not recognised by the standards.

The standards do not seem to offer any support for transition to research status.

*Good practice in teaching.* On some performance measures, independent providers can demonstrate higher quality in teaching than universities. This can be seen in a number of the QILT scales based on student surveys.

Dissemination of good practice in teaching is certainly not restricted to universities. This was abundantly clear in the contributions from the independent sector at the recent TEQSA Annual Conference.

*Community engagement.* Community engagement does not seem to be further considered in the Discussion Paper. Nevertheless, a civic contribution is a reasonable expectation of a publicly-funded institution.

The criteria for university status therefore seem to boil down to sentiment (the teaching-research nexus), size (broad discipline coverage, extensive range of services), age and government support. But this is just a description of the current universities which have converged to a single model.

The evidence supports widening the criteria for “university” and admitting “teaching-only” institutions which can make a case based on their scholarship (as conceived by Boyer). The Carnegie classification allows for recognition of different types of universities. Promoting diversity and innovation can only be healthy for the university sector.

## **Alternative models**

The discussion paper suggests that it would be difficult to gain approval for a greenfields university. For example, the criteria in Section B1.2 might allow for the University of Western Sydney which evolved from three existing Colleges, but might not allow Macquarie University which was established as a greenfields university and deliberately set out to be different. Macquarie was established by the NSW Government to address the specific issue of relieving demand for university places which could no longer be met by the two older universities in Sydney. A framework that prohibits such growth is surely inadequate.

Section B1.3 intends to provide a pathway to university status as a “University College”. It still assumes existing self-accrediting status. In addition, “university college” is commonly used for university pathway colleges (for example, University College UTas, UOW College) or even a residential college (University College, University of Melbourne).

Section B1.4 provides for specialised universities. It also assumes existing self-accrediting status. The University of Divinity was approved under this Section but its name just accords university status. (Does “University of Technology” mean an institution that offers only engineering?) The only purpose of the Section seems to be to remove the requirement for breadth but still allow access to the university title.

The discussion paper asks whether a university should be allowed to offer its courses from a city office block rather than a traditional campus. Such offshoots are largely unregulated. They may be wholly owned and operated by the university, or by a third party. In the latter case, there does not seem to be a guarantee that all staff are committed to research or that students have access to the same extensive range of student services, or that the development is supported by the relevant government. That is, there is no clear basis for allowing a “city campus” to style itself as a “university”.

Online and distance education raise further questions about provision of extensive services and education services from other jurisdictions.

Sections B1.5 and B1.6 provide for overseas universities that meet the criteria for Australian universities to operate in Australia. They do not provide for mutual recognition based on overseas university status and their purpose is unclear. They do not appear to have encouraged participation by overseas universities.

Universities in the UK are able to validate courses offered by overseas institutions under the principles of the QAA UK Quality Code. TEQSA appears to interpret this as the overseas university offering a course in Australia which would require it to be registered in Australia.

In summary, the various categories by which institutions are allowed university status do not seem useful. With the exception of the University of Divinity, they have not encouraged diversity and innovation. They do not allow recognition of different types of universities in the way that the Carnegie classification does in the US.

## **What is a university?**

The use of “university” in a business name is restricted. On the other hand, all courses whether provided by a university or a higher education provider are accredited to the same standards. Students studying at a university or at a higher education provider feel they are “studying at uni”. This was very clear on the student panel at the recent TEQSA Annual Conference.

University title carries some obligations and confers significant advantages. These include substantial government funding as well as perceived status and automatic self-accrediting status.

On the other hand, access to government funding does not seem a necessary corollary of university status. Perhaps, the funding nexus should be broken and access to government funding administered by the Department of Education as it is with the FEE-HELP student loan scheme.

There are real benefits in encouraging diversity and innovation. It is difficult to see how a single set of standards can achieve this. It is particularly difficult when those standards are not applied uniformly, but appear to preference certain types of providers.

It is to be hoped that the review will investigate ways of recognising the full range of approaches in higher education and the different types of institutions and adapt the standards to fit.

## **Appendix**

The Chairs of Academic Boards Forum (CABF) is a forum for non-university higher education providers offering opportunities for chairs of academic boards and board members to provide collective leadership and to influence developments in the Australian non-university higher education sector. (See <https://cabfnuhep.wixsite.com/cabf>.)

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This submission is made in a personal capacity and does not necessarily represent the views of any of these organisations.