

The University of Newcastle

Response to the Review of the Higher Education Provider Category Standards

In December 2018 the Department of Education released the discussion paper for the Review of the Higher Education Provider Category Standards. The offered five discussion questions with a focus on considering the following:

- the way Australia defines its higher education providers and universities
- how the Provider Category Standards signal differentiation across the sector
- how the Provider Category Standards can be optimised to best meet student, industry, regulator and government needs.

1. What characteristics should define a ‘higher education provider’ and a ‘university’ in the PCS?

2. Are the PCS fit for purpose in terms of current and emerging needs? Why?

The University of Newcastle is strongly of the view that the features that distinctly define an Australian university must be retained as part of the PCS. The requirement that an Australian University meets the Higher Education Standards Framework ensures the outstanding quality of the higher education sector in Australia is maintained.

The teaching-research nexus is a positive feature of the Australian sector that has contributed to its international success and to the sector’s appeal to students from all over the world. Therefore the requirement for a university to undertake both teaching and research must also be retained. The current requirement for a university to undertake original research in at least three broad fields of research is positively regarded, as it promotes an appropriate scale of enterprise and ensures that potential structural barriers are reduced to addressing complex global challenges. It also ensures opportunities for research and teaching engagement can better target the needs of regional locations. An additional requirement for consideration could be for a university to demonstrate international standing in at least one Field of Research.

The University of Newcastle does not support the proposal that an institution should have unlimited self-accrediting authority and suggest that potential risks would require thorough mitigation.

3. Should some categories be eliminated or new categories be introduced? What should be the features of any new categories?

We note that no institutions had ever been registered under the ‘Australian University College’ and the ‘Overseas University of Specialisation’ categories and propose that they could be removed.

4. Do specific categories need to be revised? How?

The Australian university sector is characterised by exposure to the forces of national and international competition. Within Australia, institutions compete domestically for student load, research funds, and for international student markets. Internationally the sector competes on a range of reward and recognition schemes that include university rankings and publications. Optimisation of the PCS leading to deregulation of the sector should only proceed if there is sound evidence that this would improve the performance of the sector and outcomes for students; it is unlikely this would be the case. There is strong evidence deregulation of the vocational sector has produced sub-optimal outcomes for large numbers of students.

5. How would the needs of providers, students, industry, regulator and broader public interest be served by your suggested changes to the PCS?

The University of Newcastle is of the view that any changes to the PCS must ensure that the Australian higher education sector retains its excellent national and international standing. We note the constrained financial environment in which the sector currently operates and suggest it is of fundamental importance that the quality of the sector is maintained. Australia's future prosperity, well-being and sustainability lies in knowledge based economy with Universities playing a key role.

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