

Higher Education Standards Panel Executive
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8 July 2013

Attention: Higher Education Standards Panel Executive,

Re: Higher Education Standards Panel Draft Standards for Research, Research Training, and Learning Outcomes (Research Training), Call for Comment (Number 2, 28 May 2013)

Please accept the following comments from the RMIT Higher Degree by Research Association (HDRA). The HDRA is affiliated with the RMIT University Student Union and represents higher degree by research candidates at RMIT University.

To address the questions put by the Panel, the HDRA is broadly supportive of the proposed standards. However, the HDRA wishes to comment on their specific content.

1. Comments flowing from the connection between ‘research’ and ‘research training’

The Panel has acknowledged that the draft standards are closely related. This is particularly so for the *Research* and *Research Training* standards, a consequence of the broad meaning afforded the word ‘research’. Problematically, the *Research* and *Research Training* standards sometimes differ in their requirements.

To elaborate, cl 1 of the draft standard for *Research* states that research activities of staff and students include ‘research conducted as part of research training’. This complicates any neat delineation between research and research training. One effect is that the *Research* standard seemingly applies not just to research but also to research training. This raises questions for research supervision.

a. External supervisors

Following the broad meaning of research introduced by cl 1, cl 2 of the *Research* standard could reasonably be read:

Research [*including research conducted as part of research training*] is conducted by or under the direct supervision of staff with relevant qualifications, research experience and skills in the fields of research concerned.

This would seem to limit supervisory roles to *staff* of the provider, excluding the possibility of external, non-staff supervisors in a candidate’s research training. In contrast, cl 3 of the

Research Training standard imposes no such restriction. The question is: Are external supervisors permitted?

The practice at RMIT University, and one valued by its higher degree by research candidates, is to mandate that senior supervisors are members of staff but to allow appropriately qualified non-staff to act as associate or joint supervisors. The noted tension between the draft standards leaves the legitimacy of this practice uncertain.

b. Prerequisites of supervision

The *Research* and *Research Training* standards, if they are both to apply to research training, seem to pose conflicting requirements as to the prerequisites of supervision.

Clause 2 of *Research* emphasises the ‘relevant qualifications, research experience and skills’ of supervisors. This clause seems to impose a degree of formality, particularly in its focus on qualifications; if the ‘and’ in the cited phrase is conjunctive, meaning that a supervisor must possess all of the listed qualities, the prerequisites of supervision appear high.

In comparison, *Research Training* exacts lesser standards. It demands of supervisors only that they are ‘research active’ in the case of principal supervisors, or possess ‘relevant research expertise’ in the case of associate supervisors (cl 3). Furthermore, equivalent research experience is an accepted substitute to a doctoral degree (cl 4).

The question is: will satisfaction of the *Research Training* standard also satisfy the *Research* standard?

2. Comments concerning guiding principles and standards

In the *Discussion Paper: Draft Standards for Research, Research Training and Learning Outcomes (Research Training)*, the Panel takes as a guiding principle that

research training should be supervised only by ‘research active’ supervisors and only in fields where the provider has sufficient capability, resources and infrastructure for the field of research and proposed candidatures.

Clause 3 of *Research Training* reads:

Each research training student is supervised by a principal supervisor who is research active in the relevant field of research, there is at least one associate supervisor with relevant research expertise and continuity of relevant supervisory expertise is maintained throughout the candidature.

The guiding principle and the standard are inconsistent. The standard requires that only the principal supervisor is ‘research active’; the guiding principle suggests *all* supervisors be research active. (Notably, the Panel defers to each provider to define the term ‘research active’. That fact has no bearing on this comment.)

The practice at RMIT University, and one acceptable to its higher degree by research candidates, accords with the draft *Research Training* standard.

3. Comments concerning the monitoring and reporting of research performance

Clause 6 of the draft *Research* standard requires that research performance is:

- a. monitored and reported against institutional goals, both in aggregate and by field of research
- b. analysed by reference to national or international comparators, and
- c. assessed against goals for improvement.

To whom is the research performance reported? The HDRA firmly believes in the benefits of transparency, and suggests that cl 6 be amended to stipulate to whom the institutions should report. It is submitted that, at minimum, the institutions report to staff and the student body.

Sincerely,

Higher Degree by Research Association
RMIT University