

Murdoch University

Response to HESP consultation on **Draft Standards for Research, Research Training and Learning Outcomes (Research Training)**

Murdoch University is grateful for the opportunity to provide a response to the Higher Education Standard Panel's Call for Comment (Number 2, 28 May 2013) on the second set of new draft Threshold Standards.

Q1. Do you broadly support the proposed standards for Research?

Yes and No. It is important that research standards in Universities and the community understanding of research are improved. Our citizens are frequently asked to make judgements and decisions that affect us all, whether this be in business or at election time. Improving standards should be a primary responsibility of Universities. It is important to have minimum standards and accountability. The machinery of improvement should be the responsibility of Universities and other approved *research* agencies.

Having said that, the system is already self-regulatory in a variety of ways. Research is a largely competitive, peer reviewed activity and there are already a number of mechanisms through which the quality of research and its ethical integrity are assured. There is a mandatory requirement for research institutions to abide by the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (the *Code*), under which they can be audited by, for example, the NHMRC. The ERA exercise is a quality audit of research, albeit that it is not compulsory for institutions to participate. With the current review of higher education regulatory burden underway, it is important that any additional regulatory burden is kept to a minimum.

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

Yes, see below:

1. This standard is already in the *Code* and we ask would it not be possible to build in assessment of this standard to an audit of the entire code?
2. This standard is vague, raising the question of how “relevant” qualifications, experience and skills would be defined. Using the word discipline as opposed to Field of Research might help as each discipline has accepted standards against which they can be judged.
3. This standard, if accepted at all, should only be prospectively applied and grand parented in for existing staff. As we expect all University Academic staff to do research (even those who are teaching intensive) an induction around research standards should be applied across the board.
4. Having a definition for research active staff is not a regulatory matter for which a threshold standard is required. Rather, it is a management device for institutions themselves. The wording of the standard recognises this and the effect is that the standard is vague and it will add no value to the regulatory effort. This standard should be deleted.
5. There needs to be clarification about whether this standard means using a research repository or a research management system. All publicly funded research would happily sit in a public repository. There may be reason not to have all research commercially sensitive research stored in such a way.
6. Participation in the ERA exercise is evidence that performance is monitored and analysed. Reporting against institutional goals affords the opportunity to show improvement and also allows diversity in the sector and therefore we support this standard.

Q3. Do you broadly support the proposed standards for Research Training?

Yes

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

Yes, see below:

1. Many of the sub-sections of this standard are already covered in one place or another in the *Code*. It is our experience that many of the multi-part standards are complex and require a significant number of very different items of evidence in order to demonstrate compliance. Multi-part standards should be as simple as

possible and objectively assessable. Additionally, this standard seems to overlap with others (see below).

2. This standard seems to be a statement of the obvious and could be considered for deletion.
3. It is important that the principal supervisor is the one who is an experienced researcher with a demonstrable track record (as distinct from research active) in the relevant discipline?
4. In the current environment, the principal supervisor should hold a doctoral degree to supervise masters or doctoral candidates. Equivalent research track record (as opposed to experience, as experience does not equate to expertise) as judged by the institution as a form of grand parenting would be acceptable.
5. This standard is already covered in Standard 1c, so one of them should be deleted to avoid duplication.
6. This standard is already covered in Standard 1b and 1f, and again, one or the other should be deleted to avoid duplication.
7. This standard is ambiguous in its intention. Universities readily accept that external examiners' reports should (a) provide "informed external views on the standing of the work in the field of research", and (b) in the case of doctoral degrees, assess the work on the basis that it shows "evidence of a significant contribution to the field of research". This is the role of an external examiner so what this standard means is not clear. There is also an obvious link here with Learning Outcomes (RT) Standard 4.
8. This is another multi-part standard, which will require a number of different pieces of evidence to show compliance. There will be additional work in here for the institution –It would be helpful if a generic set of questions could be developed and used for student feedback across the sector. We are not sure how one assesses quality of supervision as what suits one student does not suit another and thus is a perception that might or not be right for students depending on the student. There will be confusion around this unless there is central coordination.

Q5. Do you broadly support the proposed standards for Learning Outcomes (Research Training)?

Yes

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

Yes, see below:

1. Some of this standard appears to be a duplication of Coursework Learning Outcomes standards so does it need to be repeated in this domain – can the other standard not be broadened to include those for Research Degrees?
2. It is interesting to note that there is no reference to the AQF here, even as a Reference Point, as is the case with the new draft Coursework Learning Outcomes. Research higher degree qualifications must be compliant with the AQF in the same way as other awards. Despite the explanation about the AQF and threshold standards provided by HESP in Communique #8, there is still a concern that there is no acknowledgement in any of the new threshold standards that compliance with the AQF is mandatory. This gap has the potential to cause further confusion into the future.
3. The AQF already specifies such learning outcomes. It seems strange to remove compliance with the AQF as a standard and then put the details back into this standard.
4. This standard does not belong under Learning Outcomes (RT).

Q7. Do you wish to make any suggestions about the form, style, scope or any other aspect of the proposed set of research-related standards?

It would be helpful if only standards crucial to the maintenance of quality are set, and that those standards are measurable and achievable. In drafting the standards, careful consideration should be given to how easily institutions will be able to provide items of evidence to demonstrate compliance.