

Defining quality for research training: IRU response to consultation paper

The consultation paper “Defining quality for research training” is the first paper concerning the future arrangements for the Commonwealth’s funding and regulation of research training in Australia. A further paper focussed at the Research Training Scheme is to follow.

The IRU welcomes the consultation paper’s focus on identifying the important elements of research training which should be present in each university and for all research students. The responses to the paper should provide the basis to develop a suitable framework for the future. The following issues relate to how to ensure that those elements are present through an effective mix of university commitments, Government requirements, funding incentives and responsiveness to research student decisions. The IRU looks forward to contributing to the next stages of this discussion.

The paper’s initial sections provide a valuable update on the size, shape and nature of the research higher degree cohort. It is particularly useful for demonstrating the wide range of research students typical of IRU universities. The section shows that the majority of research students do not enrol immediately following study, with fewer than 25% enrolling directly from undergraduate study. As a consequence the clear majority are older than thirty. It means that we need to consider mechanisms that will be effective for the diverse group of students, in working through how to ensure good quality research training.

The IRU’s response concentrates on the larger framing issues the consultation paper raises while touching on the specific questions the paper poses, considering in turn:

- the nature of good research training, addressing consultation questions two to four and eight;
- the relationship of ERA to assessment of the research environment, addressing consultation questions five and six;
- the approach to ensuring high quality research training including use of the quality regulatory framework, addressing consultation questions one and eleven; and
- the remaining questions the consultation paper raises covering consultation questions seven, nine and ten.

The IRU response is supportive of, and complementary to, the response from the Council of the Deans and Directors of Graduate Research (DDOGS) which gives detailed consideration to each of the consultation questions.

The nature of good research training

The heart of the discussion paper focuses on the question of what aspects indicate good research training. The issues considered – physical resources, opportunities for student extension, supervision, the scholarly environment, the acquisition of a suitable mix of research skills and knowledge – are all potentially relevant to an effective assessment of the quality of the research training within a university.

Some of the elements chosen for discussion are inputs that are often the focus for individual students but which ignore the more subtle influences over the quality of research training. They are legitimately aspects of research training which could influence a potential student’s decision about

whether, or with which institution, to enrol but do not provide the a comprehensive basis to assess the quality of the research training.

The DDOGS papers provide a valuable basis against which to create a framework of expectations for research training that would permit an informed consideration of each university's achievement. The DDOGS response to the consultation paper sets this out in more detail. Each IRU member has policies in place that address these and many other issues consistent with the ongoing work of the DDOGS to ensure an effective research training environment for research students.

Should an institution not be meeting significant elements of the DDOGS framework that would be cause for action, including potentially reducing or removing access to funding. This would address the desire in **consultation questions two, three and four** to create specific enforcement mechanisms through creating a single process that assesses the whole of the research training provided and which allows for variation and diversity in how it is achieved.

Consultation question eight focuses on current discussions about broader skills development within a research degree to set up graduates' future employment more effectively.

Universities will continue to develop the nature and shape of their qualifications. Overall we support the effective inclusion of coursework into research qualifications. IRU members are concerned to ensure the research training they provide is of the greatest value in both the research produced and the future potential of the research student. IRU is exploring options to increase relevant coursework for its research students as a means to strengthen student outcomes and attract potential students to our universities. This will take account of the diverse range of students: some research students begin as 21 year olds with little or no professional experience; others do so after twenty to thirty years in high level jobs for whom the research is the prime outcome.

The case for a requirement to include course work is far from made. In establishing national frameworks like the AQF and creating Research Standards for external assurance it is essential that universities' responsibility and capacity for development of the nature of qualifications is encouraged not stymied. Inclusion in the framework for quality research training of the capacity for research training to support graduates' future needs is sufficient basis to encourage the best use of coursework and other developments as the nature of the research degree continues to develop.

The relationship of ERA to assessment of the research environment

One element of a framework for assessing the quality of research training is the 'research environment' in the sense of the interaction of research students with others undertaking high quality research. The IRU is concerned that the consultation paper places too much emphasis on ERA ratings as a simple means to determine this.

Section 5.3.4 of the paper states that "ERA is an excellent indicator of recent research performance at the discipline level". The IRU agrees that ERA does provide a measure of research outcomes by discipline. The IRU does not agree with **consultation question five's** transformation of the sentence into "positive ERA results provide evidence of a quality research training environment at an institution".

The implication from the consultation paper is that research training should be restricted to researchers in fields where the university received an ERA rating of 3 or better and where various other requirements are also met. This would be a crude and harmful mechanism to ensure research students have access to a scholarly environment.

ERA ratings of three or more indicate that the university has many high quality researchers in that field, who may or may not be co-located or otherwise linked. Evidence from the IRU universities is that the researchers linked to a particular 2 or 4 digit code are often drawn from quite distinct academic units. Further, that a field overall has not received a high rating, or no rating, does not preclude the presence of high achieving researchers in that area within the university.

The provision has the potential to hold back the development of new fields, both new to the university and new to Australian (or world) research by preventing research students operating in new areas until the established academics have generated sufficient high quality output to gain the approved ERA outcome. This would undermine the role research students themselves play in ensuring a constructive, creative research environment.

There are also significant implications for existing fields, such as education, where across the board the ERA ratings were not strong. Pursuing that example, to preclude research training in education across many or most universities is highly unlikely to encourage development of a new generation of researchers capable of raising the overall standard. Rather, it risks ensuring that there is no succession in such fields, with education already notable for being particularly susceptible to high levels of retirements over the coming five to ten years.

The question is not whether the ERA information is relevant but how it is used. The blanket in or out approach suggested ignores the subtleties outlined above and the capacity for other mechanisms to achieve a similar outcome. In choosing where, and with what supervisor, to undertake a research degree, prospective students will consider ERA results. There seems no doubt that the ERA ratings will influence the proportion of RTS funding which a university will receive, as it will the other funding schemes. These create an incentive for universities to focus resources at the high rating areas and to ensure any lower rated areas develop. The university argument for these should be one factor the university Compact addresses. Taken together, these act against research training being supported in low rated areas unless there is a driving reason to do so – including considerable demand from prospective students.

It is also important to consider the logical consequences if ERA is used across Government funding programs to shut off research in areas not rated 3 or above. The 3 rating is tied to international norms. Reducing the lower level in Australia would tend to raise the norm. Should other countries follow a similar approach the norm will rise even further. Hence what was rated 3 would in the future rate lower, forcing further reduction in areas of research and research training, which in turn would raise the point of the international norm. It is sensible to encourage researchers to operate at levels at or better than those elsewhere. It is, however, difficult for all to be at or above the average.

Consultation questions 5 and 6 ask what other evidence for a research intensive environment could be added to the use of ERA. The IRU response is that the framework for quality of research training should include the provision of such an environment requiring each university to demonstrate it drawing on relevant evidence, not the misuse of ERA ratings as a proxy. If ERA were to be used as the starting point then evidence of participation in collaborative research networks, the identification of areas for development in the university compact and high levels of student demand should be relevant balancing factors.

Ensuring high quality research training and use of the regulatory framework

The intent of the consultation paper is to identify the major aspects of good research training. It does so tightly linked to how these could be mandated once the essential elements are identified. It largely sets aside funding issues, other than the potential to restrict Government funding to approved fields or disciplines, determined university by university. The exclusion of funding appears

to allow a better focus on the question of how to ensure good quality research training. However, funding also act to encourage or discourage particular approaches to university support for research training.

Ensuring high quality of research training involves consideration of three elements and the way in which they interact:

- the aspects of research training that are important to its successful provision;
- the role for requirements which mandate that those aspects be present; and
- the use of funding and information mechanisms to encourage those aspects.

Hence the question of how to ensure good quality research training must consider both the regulatory directives considered in the first paper and the impact of funding incentives and student information resources which can encourage better outcomes than a simple requirement for specific actions and services. Full discussion of all these factors is yet to come.

In terms of mechanisms to enforce essential elements of research training the new quality framework for higher education provides a significant base.

The *TEQSA Act 2011* sets Threshold Standards which will be the base on which all higher education providers, including universities, are registered from 2012. The current draft of the national Provider Standards set minimum requirements for support for students. It includes specific reference to ensuring research students receive suitable supervision, suitable support services and resources, and work in an appropriate research environment (1.8 of the Provider Course Accreditation Standards). The draft Qualification Standards, which complete the Threshold Standards, define the outcomes expected for the award of a research degree through close reference to the Australian Qualification Framework. As self accrediting institutions universities are expected to exercise their powers consistent with the AQF.

The *TEQSA Act 2011* then envisages that there will be Research Standards to be developed by the National Standards Panel. The question of how they are designed and the mechanism for assessing them is still under consideration. In particular there is a threshold question about whether the additional standards beyond the Threshold Standards should be focused at a meet/do not meet minimum test or look to provide a broader assessment of the extent and quality of achievement against the Research Standards. The second approach would provide a complementary perspective that would add to the Threshold Standards requirements for universities and others providing higher degrees by research.

In terms of **Consultation Question 1** the IRU supports the need for higher degrees by research to be provided in a suitable environment, with necessary supports and resources for students. Through the responses to the consultation paper and further discussions, in combination with extensive previous work, a viable set of quality markers can be developed which could underpin the proposed Research Standards. The framework outlined by the DDOGS is a viable base for creating such a set. The university Compacts would then provide a basis for specific university commitments and targets. The IRU's guiding principle is that incentives and other pressures to respond to aspects of good research training will produce a better outcome than highly specific mandated requirements.

In terms of access to funding, no provider of higher degrees by research can operate, and hence remain eligible for Government funding schemes, without meeting the minimum Threshold Standards requirements. At that level the IRU agrees that minimum requirements should be met before funding is provided.

Whether there should be particular additional requirements that drive access to the funding schemes, for the institution as a whole or for particular fields of research, goes to the question of what mix of funding and mandated requirements will best ensure good quality research training. The IRU looks forward to engaging with this question when the following papers in this process are released for response.

Consultation Question 11 considers entry requirements to research higher degrees.

The ultimate test for whether a university's selection processes are working is the extent to which students complete their qualification, with evidence that the standard of work produced is consistent with the AQF descriptor for the relevant research degree.

It is clear that a large proportion of students do not progress in a streamlined process from school to undergraduate degree to research degree. Many, especially in non science areas, have come to higher level research after a range of experiences, with the undergraduate degree they hold being only one part of current capacity to undertake a research degree. To prescribe how universities select students at a time when the pathways are growing not reducing will only hamper universities' effective use of their judgement, a judgment ultimately tested by the outcome, within a system that is likely to remain funded in part according to completions.

Other consultation questions

Consultation Question 7: Should government do more to enable research training in multidisciplinary environments? What barriers are there and how might they be overcome?

Universities have developed multidisciplinary research and will do so in the future driven by ambitions to gain the best research outcomes. The role for Government in encouraging this is mostly to ensure its requirements and assumptions do not discourage it. For example, the IRU has argued that the structure of ERA does not encourage multi-disciplinary research. As the discussion paper makes clear ERA will be used to influence, if not delimit, research training. This gives universities considerable incentive to optimise ERA ratings, which can act against supporting good multidisciplinary research.

Consultation Question 9: Should the rules associated with Australian Postgraduate Award scholarships be amended or increased in flexibility? If so, in what ways?

The IRU supports the APA arrangements being consistent with the formal rules for length of Government funded support for undertaking a research qualification. The other issues raised reflect that the diverse range of research students does not sit comfortably with the APA historic design to support a full time research student, most likely relatively young. The concern with relaxing the requirements is that people with less financial need for support could be advantaged.

The IRU supports further development of the proposal the DDOGS make for universities to have the flexibility to use their APA allocation, expressed in dollar terms rather than scholarship numbers, as they think best within a broad envelope of possible criteria for allocation.

Consultation Question 10: What is the role of the research masters degree in the Australian research training system? Is its decline a cause for concern?

The IRU supports the comments from the DDOGS about this question.

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