

## Innovative Research Universities Response to Higher Education Standards Panel Call for Comment Number 2

### General Comments

The guiding principle that ERA performance reports are ‘not an appropriate requirement of minimum standards for research’ is welcome. The use of the term ‘fields of research’ used throughout the draft standards is prescriptive, and strongly linked to ERA assessments. This should be replaced with the term ‘discipline’ in all cases to better include interdisciplinary research and that which otherwise does not fall neatly into the ABS Field of Science and Technology Codes.

### Draft Standards for 4.1 Research

*1. All research activities of staff and students, including research conducted as part of research training, are carried out in accordance with the provider’s academic governance requirements for research, encompassing:*

- a) ethical conduct of research and responsible research practice*
- b) ownership and management of intellectual property*
- c) research partnerships*
- d) publication and authorship*
- e) resolution of allegations of misconduct in research, and*
- f) compliance with prevailing regulatory requirements that are applicable to the field of research.*

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue.

*2. Research is conducted by or under the direct supervision of staff with relevant qualifications, research experience and skills in the fields of research concerned.*

The standard addresses an important issue. The phrase ‘direct supervision’ may be interpreted strongly, implying a high level of oversight. The word ‘direct’ should therefore be removed from the standard to allow flexibility in supervision, as appropriate to the discipline and project.

*3. Staff engaged in research are formally inducted into their roles.*

The need for this standard is not clear. Staff induction is not unique to research roles such that any requirement of this order would be better placed in a standard which applies to all staff. If there are components of induction that are unique to research staff but are also applicable to all research staff, then these need to be explicit to justify a separate standard.

*4. The concept of ‘research-active’ staff is defined and complied with in the implementation of research policy and practices.*

It is not clear why an institutional definition of ‘research active’ constitutes a threshold issue for effective research activity. The definition of ‘research active’ varies considerably between institutions and in some cases within institutions with regards to specific disciplines and levels of appointment and has variable uses in university research management.

Hence, the standard, and any references to ‘research active’ throughout the standards, should be removed but also see our comments on Research Training proposed standard 3.

*5. An accurate, secure and up-to-date repository of the research outputs of staff and research students is maintained.*

The standard addresses an important issue.

6. *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.*

The standard appears to apply to institutional performance not that of individual researchers but the latter could be read into it. The wording should be clear about what is intended.

Standard 6.c. is not appropriate for inclusion as a threshold standard. It is not possible to define a provider's ability to deliver research based on aspirational goals.

*Reference Points*

- i. *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (Australian Government, 2007).*
- ii. *Excellence in Research for Australia.*

ERA should be removed as a reference point in keeping with the guiding principles outlined in the discussion paper.

### **Draft Standards for 4.2 Research Training**

1. *Research training is conducted in accordance with the provider's academic governance requirements for research training, encompassing:*

- a) *requirements for admission and approval of candidature that take into account the preparedness of the candidate, the availability of qualified, competent and accessible supervision and the resources necessary for the candidature*
- b) *the rights and responsibilities of students and supervisors*
- c) *induction and orientation of students and supervisors*
- d) *monitoring and maintaining progress*
- e) *assessment, examination and the independence of examiners*
- f) *publication of research findings, and*
- g) *resolution of disputes.*

The standard addresses an important issue.

Standard 1.a. would benefit from referring to 'academic preparedness' specifically, to aid clarity.

Standard 1.c. is unclear with regards to induction of and orientation supervisors and what this encompasses. Does this refer to accreditation of supervisors in line with the requirements of Standards 3 and 4 below, or to the normal induction and orientation processes for all university staff? If the latter, this is best covered in a standard applicable to all university in a different section.

The remainder of the standard is clear.

2. *Coursework formally included in a course of study that involves research training, whether as a component of or an adjunct to research training, meets the academic governance and quality assurance requirements required of other coursework offered by the provider.*

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue.

3. *Each research 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.*

4. *In the case of supervision of students in a course of study that leads to a research higher degree, the principal supervisor holds a doctoral degree or has equivalent research experience.*

These standards address an important issue but Standard 3 is not clearly worded. The reference to 'research active' should be removed for reasons outlined under Research Standard 4. The minimum level of research activity for a principal supervisor, as outlined in a standard, should apply to all universities equally and as such should not be related to an internally defined concept of 'research-active.' It should further be flexible enough to allow for supervision in research disciplines where non-traditional outputs are common.

The definition in the current Higher Education Standards Framework (3.1.8) provides a useful starting point. Allowances should also be made for cases of supervision by retired or late-career researchers who may have a lower level of research activity as a candidature progresses.

Standards 3 and 4 would further be better combined into a single standard. Suggested text is below:

3. Continuity of relevant supervisory expertise is maintained throughout the candidature of each research student, and encompasses:

- a) a principal supervisor who holds a doctoral degree or equivalent research experience in a discipline relevant to the research program and who is, under normal circumstances, actively carrying out research and producing research outputs in a discipline relevant to the research program; and
- b) at least one associate supervisor with relevant research expertise.

5. *Research students receive an induction about codes of conduct for research, ethics, occupational health and safety, intellectual property and additional matters that are specific to the field of research.*

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue.

6. *Research students are guided and supported to shape the directions of their research, to develop capacities for independent research and to present and publish their research findings.*

While clear and addressing an important issue, the standard does not take into account instances where a candidate is part of a larger project group and whose research is subject to the requirements of that group or to a specific grant, and where as a result there is significantly less flexibility in the research program and the student's ability to publish independently.

7. *The standing of research arising from research training is monitored, including by reviewing all examiners' reports independently of supervisors to obtain:*

- a) *informed external views on the standing of the work in the field of research, and*
- b) *in the case of doctoral degrees, evidence of a significant original contribution to the field of research.*

The standard addresses an important issue. The use of the term 'reviewing' could be misinterpreted to mean a formal review process additional to existing thesis assessment and award conferral processes that satisfy the intended outcome of the standard.

8. *The quality and extent of research training is monitored against institutional goals, both in aggregate and by field of research, encompassing:*

- a) *durations of candidature and rates of progression, completion and attrition*
- b) *quality of supervision*
- c) *contributions of research students to institutional research performance*
- d) *feedback from students, and*
- e) *actions taken to improve research training.*

While the standard addresses an important issue, it is not clear how the ‘quality of supervision’ (8.b.) is measured or monitored as a standard.

#### *Reference Points*

- i. Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (Australian Government 2007).*
- ii. Guidelines developed by the Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Research.*

It will need to be clear whether the guidelines the Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Research develop describe its view of acceptable practice, and therefore directly relevant to the threshold standards, or set good practice, which would instead set a more aspirational target for universities which many would wish to meet but may choose not to in some or all aspects.

This raises this issue which IRU addressed in commenting on previous draft standards that the reference points are only that, and should not be used as a mechanism to assess university compliance with threshold standards.

#### **Draft Standards for 1.6 Learning Outcomes (Research Training)**

The Panel asks whether this standard should be separate or integrated with 1.5 Learning Outcomes (Coursework). In terms of simplifying and focusing the standards an integrated approach is better.

- 1. The learning outcomes for all courses of study are specified*

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue.

- 2. The learning outcomes are comparable to those for the same or similar qualifications offered elsewhere in Australia, and are informed by international comparators.*

The standard is clear and addresses an important issue. The wording allows for reference to the Australian Qualification Framework to assess consistency with the qualification.

- 3. On completion of research training, candidates will have demonstrated, at a level consistent with the qualification awarded:*

- a) a detailed understanding of the specific topic of research, located within a broad understanding of the field of research*
- b) the capacity to scope, design, plan and conduct research projects independently and in collaboration*
- c) technical research skills and competency in the application of research methods*
- d) skills in analysis, criticism, presentation, reporting and publication of research findings, and*
- e) generic skills required for research, including capacities to transfer across different environments and fields of research.*

The standard addresses an important issue. References to ‘transfer across different environments and fields of research’ under 3.e. may not be relevant to all disciplines and should not be included as a threshold standard.

- 4. Assessment of theses, dissertations, exegeses, creative works or other major assessable research outputs and materials is undertaken:*

- a) for doctoral degrees, by at least two independent experts with international standing who are external to the provider and any collaborating institution involved in the work, and*
- b) for masters degrees, by at least one independent expert who is external to the provider and any collaborating institution involved in the work.*

While the standard addresses an important issue, its inclusion in the Learning Outcomes (Research Training) section is not appropriate. The method of and requirements for assessing research student outputs is not itself a learning outcome. This standard is better placed in 4.2 Research Training.