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13 March 2026

IRU response to proposed changes to the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021*

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on proposed changes to the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021*.

The Threshold Standards play a critical role in maintaining the high quality of Australia's higher education system and providing the basis for regulation and registration by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA).

The IRU supports the important role of the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) in providing independent advice to government on the Threshold Standards and regulation. We welcome the HESP's stated commitment to transparent and inclusive consultation processes to inform its advice on potential updates to the Standards.

In previous policy submissions (including through the Australian Universities Accord), the IRU has supported the ongoing role of the Threshold Standards to provide a standard baseline for universities, while also allowing for increased differentiation among institutions and greater focus on the distinct needs of their students and communities.

In our recent submissions, we have also noted the increasing multiple layers of regulation and reporting that apply to Australian universities and called for a whole-of-system review to identify existing duplication/overlap and opportunities for streamlining. We welcome the recent announcement by Education Minister the Hon Jason Clare MP of a new Better Regulation Working Group, designed to "streamline processes and improve efficiency". This will hopefully allow universities to focus more resources on their core functions of teaching and research, and create room for more innovation and differentiation.

The IRU supports the establishment of the new Australian Tertiary Education Commission (ATEC) to improve stewardship of the tertiary system. We agree in principle that the functions of the HESP could be incorporated within the ATEC, but we have recommended that the ATEC should maintain an advisory committee like the HESP to provide it with independent advice on the Threshold Standards and their implementation. Under the new ATEC, there should also be a clear demarcation between the new mission-based compact agreements (which should focus on differentiation of institutional missions and performance) and compliance/regulation activities linked to the Threshold Standards.

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We provide more detailed feedback below on each of the four priority areas discussed in the consultation paper. We welcome the HESP's commitment to open consultation on proposed changes to the Threshold Standards and recognise that there is an inherent tension between early engagement to stimulate discussion on priorities for change and being able to provide more detail about specific changes.

In general, the IRU supports the intent of periodic review and targeted amendments to ensure that the Threshold Standards remain relevant and up-to-date. However in some specific cases (as outlined below) we believe that more detail will be needed before we can provide a clear view on the pros and cons of specific changes. The short timeline for this consultation process has also made it difficult to consult broadly across our member universities.

We seek to engage constructively with the HESP, ATEC and TEQSA on these important issues. We have provided our initial feedback on each of the four priority areas below and would be happy to continue to engage on more detailed proposals for changes to the Threshold Standards as they are developed.

1. Demonstrating a commitment to addressing racism

The IRU supports the focus on this important issue and agrees with the proposal in the consultation paper that the Threshold Standards should make it clear that higher education providers have a responsibility to take a "proactive approach... to prevent and respond to racism".

All IRU member universities are committed to providing a safe, inclusive and well-governed environment for students and staff, and already prohibit racism through their existing policies on discrimination, harassment and bullying. We are supportive of measures to ensure an explicit, institution-wide commitment to addressing racism with clear definitions and accountability.

The consultation paper notes requirements under existing Standards that providers must foster and promote a safe environment (2.3.4) and that governing bodies must maintain an environment in which staff and students are treated equitably and in which their wellbeing is fostered (6.1.4). There is also a requirement in the Standards that universities comply with all relevant legislation (6.2.1a).

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) launched a National Anti-Racism Framework in late 2024 but this has not been formally adopted by government as a statement of policy or law. TEQSA issued a Statement of Regulatory Expectations (SRE) in October 2025 on improving complaints procedures and transparency about the handling of complaints. And the University Governance Principles (see below) also include a requirement to monitor and improve complaints processes. Any changes to the Threshold Standards should be implemented carefully to ensure that there is no duplication or contradiction across different areas and other regulatory advice from TEQSA.

The IRU supports a focus on proactive prevention and response and believes that this should be done through careful strengthening of existing Standards rather than addition of a new stand-alone section. Within institutions, specific anti-racism statements and efforts should be

embedded within existing governance and equity/inclusion frameworks. Mechanisms related to a demonstrated commitment to addressing racism should leverage existing data (including in response to the existing SRE) and expertise.

There is not enough detail provided in the consultation paper to see how any changes would work in practice – there should be further consultation with the sector on this. We agree that change should be in line with the HESP’s four principles for amending the Threshold Standards, namely that amendments are: as concise as possible; are universal rather than targeting a specific cohort; should not replicate other existing obligations; and are verifiable and achievable.

2. Incorporating the University Governance Principles and transparency requirements

The IRU agrees that it is timely to discuss updates to the Threshold Standards in light of the important work of the Expert Council on University Governance. At a time of rapid change, continuous improvement and good governance are essential to ensure that universities continue to serve the changing needs of their students and communities.

We agree that the Standards could be amended to make reference to the University Governance Principles (and that TEQSA will then look at an institution’s adoption of the Principles as part of regulation and registration). We suggest that this should be done at the level of high-level principles – we do not agree that the sub-principles need to be inserted into the Standards in full.

When more detail is included in the Standards, there is a risk of duplication and inconsistencies between the Threshold Standards, annual reporting requirements and mission-based compacts (which will include agreed KPIs between each university and government). The consultation paper refers to the Expert Council’s recommendation that TEQSA be responsible for “evaluating and reporting on university performance” against the Governance Principles, but there should be a clear distinction between performance monitoring in compacts, reporting and transparency in Annual Reports and the regulatory role of TEQSA.

If the Threshold Standards are to refer to the University Governance Principles, the HESP and TEQSA should ensure that there are no inconsistencies between the two – for example, Principle 6.2 states that university governing bodies are responsible for providing “a safe and inclusive environment for staff and students” but it does not specify that universities must have a stand-alone anti-racism plan (see above).

We support the Expert Council’s “if not, why not” principle that encourages proactive engagement with the Principles, while also recognising that the capacities of individual institutions may vary and may be impacted by external factors (for example a State Government’s decisions about the composition of a university Council).

The consultation paper also discusses strengthened standards on “academic oversight, staffing profiles and teaching quality” but it is not clear how these would relate to existing standards or the specific issue(s) that existing requirements are unable to address. Without further detail, we cannot properly assess whether strengthened standards on academic oversight, staffing profiles and teaching quality are needed.

3. Supporting people with a disability

The consultation paper proposes a number of changes to improve inclusion and outcomes for people with a disability. The paper details existing requirements under the Threshold Standards, including the responsibility to provide support services for specific cohorts (2.3.3) and to comply with relevant legislation (6.2.1a). It also notes that the government is currently reviewing the *Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA) and the *Disability Standards for Education 2005* (DSE). The paper raises important issues about outdated terminology and the tension between universal design principles for all students and staff, and specifying particular responsibilities for institutions to focus on the needs of identified groups.

We agree that these are important issues for improving inclusion and targeting support to where it is most needed. However we believe that it would make more sense to review the relevant wording in the Threshold Standards once the reviews of the DDA and DSE are complete.

4. Responding to emerging technology risks

The consultation paper notes the rapid development of emerging technologies such as AI and their potential to create system-wide risks for universities. These could include risks to quality, academic and research integrity, transparency and equity. The paper also notes that overly prescriptive regulation limits innovation by higher education providers.

The paper states that “strengthened governance standards would ensure that innovation supports equity, safety and public trust” but these are contested concepts that will require careful management on a case-by-case basis. It is not clear from the consultation paper that the existing Threshold Standards are deficient in requiring governing bodies to consider risks from emerging technologies within their institutional context as part of existing governance practices. We agree that it is preferable to focus attention on “emerging technologies” rather than naming individual technologies.

Finally, the IRU supports the proposal that the Threshold Standard should be subject to a cyclical review process. If the ATEC legislation passes Parliament, we support the ATEC taking on responsibility for the Threshold Standards, but it should be supported by an advisory committee like the HESP to provide independent advice on changes to the Standards, including open engagement with a diverse range of stakeholders including providers and their students. This would also allow the ATEC to ensure ongoing alignment between the Standards and its priorities for the system, for example its current work on teaching practice and excellence.

We look forward to continued engagement on these issues.

Yours sincerely,



Paul Harris
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