



Higher Education Standards Panel

Communique Number 11 – June 2014

Report on Information Session for proposed Higher Education Standards Framework – 14 May 2014, Melbourne Airport

Introduction

Welcome to the eleventh Communique from the Higher Education Standards Panel. The purpose of this Communique is to report on the stakeholder information session held on 14 May 2014 at Melbourne Airport following the release of Call for Comment 3 on 23 April 2014 on the proposed Higher Education Standards Framework. The Call for Comment is open for feedback until 27 June 2014. The information session was open to the higher education sector to seek clarification about the Framework from the Panel. It was also an opportunity for participants to provide initial feedback on the Framework.

Approximately 200 participants attended the information session where I, as Panel Chair, delivered a presentation on the key features of the proposed Framework including the alignment of Part A of the Framework with the delivery of higher education and the integration of the education-related requirements of the ESOS National Code. My presentation also noted that the Panel is undertaking a separate review process for the current provider categories standards (see Part B of the proposed Framework) and that the sector would be consulted at a later date on the outcomes of the Panel's review of this component. A copy of my presentation is available to download on the Panel's website (<http://www.hestandards.gov.au/information-session-proposed-hes-framework>).

The feedback from the session indicated strong support for the structure of the proposed Framework and the clarity of the Standards. A number of questions and comments were raised and these and the Panel's responses have been summarised below.

Further details about the Panel and its work, including the Panel's previous communiqués, are available on the Panel's website (<http://www.HEstandards.gov.au>).

Summary of questions and comments on the proposed Framework

Role of peer review and professional judgement

The inclusion of peer review and professional judgement in the proposed Framework in relation to learning outcomes and academic integrity was noted by attendees. The Panel confirmed that peer review has an integral role in establishing that standards for learning outcomes at course level are being met. Professional judgement in relation to recognition of prior learning was also raised in relation to Standard 1.2.2b and the Panel clarified that the Standard requires two parameters to be met – consistency with the level of qualification and integrity of the course of study.

Composition and role of Part C

Some questions were raised in relation to the Standards that apply to the regulatory processes specified in Part C and the legislative basis for Part C. The Panel clarified that the sets of Standards are a guide for these regulatory processes and the specific Standards included will depend on how familiar the regulator is with the provider and the regulator's assessment of risk. The Panel observed that most of the Standards in Domain 5 (Quality Assurance) and Domain 6 (Governance) are a culmination of the higher-level outcomes of other Standards in the proposed Framework.

Reference points

Attendees raised general comments in relation to the use of Reference Points and the Panel reiterated its position on the value of many documents (such as national codes of good practice) utilised by the sector to support quality. To assist the sector in meeting the proposed Standards, the Panel has chosen to nominate some of these documents or parts of these documents as Reference Points without making them mandatory Standards.

Provider obligations to students

Some concern was raised about whether the Standards would sufficiently protect students as they rely heavily on compliance with the standards for learning outcomes. The Panel acknowledged that although there may be a time lag between inappropriate behaviour on the part of a provider and when that behaviour comes to the attention of the regulator, ethical practice should not solely rely on the presence of a regulator. The Panel also noted that the proposed Framework includes standards for organisational culture, equitable treatment and wellbeing in the Corporate Governance Domain.

Role of the Australian Qualifications Framework in the proposed Framework

Attendees commented on the changed role of the AQF in the proposed Framework and noted that the work undertaken to date in complying with the AQF may not be necessary. The Panel clarified that three approaches had been taken regarding the AQF in the proposed Framework. The approaches consist of: mandatory consistency of Australian Higher Education Qualifications with the level classification of the AQF; incorporation of relevant policy intent of the AQF into the proposed Standards; and use of the AQF as a Reference Point in some sections e.g. Course Design. There was also discussion of the AQF requirement of a research component in Masters degree (Coursework). A representative of the AQFC Secretariat noted that information would be released shortly regarding changes to the specifications for Masters Degrees including the volume of learning descriptors and confirmed that a review of the implementation of the AQF was due to take place in 2015.

English language requirements and use of footnotes

There were concerns regarding whether reference to English language requirements in a footnote was sufficient. There was also concern that highlighting English language requirements may impact on the participation of international students. The Panel indicated it had received similar comments from other stakeholders and while it maintains that clarification of a Standard statement in a footnote does not reduce the level of compliance or the importance of what is required, the Panel will re-consider the current drafting of the Standard in light of the feedback.

Composition of corporate boards

Attendees noted that the proposed Framework does not include a requirement for external members on a corporate board, as required by the current Threshold Standards. The Panel confirmed that the focus of the proposed Standards is on the outcomes of corporate governance rather than on the processes. However, the Panel also noted that the absence of the requirement should not discourage good practices such as the inclusion of external members or members with higher education experience as part of corporate governance.

Research standards

The potential overlap between the Standards for learning outcomes for research training and the existing requirements of national codes for research was raised. The Panel noted that although practices may change over time, it is important to establish a national standard for the examination of research training outcomes that is applicable to all providers.

Qualifications of teaching staff

There was some discussion of whether more stringent teaching qualifications should be required for teaching staff than what is specified in Standard 3.2.2c. The Panel acknowledged that teacher

training for higher education was an ongoing issue in the sector and that further analysis of the issue is required.

Timeline for transition to a new Framework

Several questions were raised in relation to when and how a new Framework would be implemented. The Panel intends to provide advice to the Minister by the end of 2014 and, following consultations by the Minister in accordance with the TEQSA Act, a new legislative instrument could be made during 2015 as well as any necessary amendments to the TEQSA Act in relation to the Framework. Although the Panel is not in a position to advise on TEQSA operations, the current processes would continue until, based on the Panel's advice, the Commonwealth Minister for Education makes new Standards, followed by transitional arrangements.

Providing Feedback to the Panel

Call for Comment 3 (including the background paper and proposed Framework) is available to download from <http://www.hestandards.gov.au/engagement/call-comment-number-3>

The closing date for comments is **Friday 27 June 2014**. Comments should be sent to the Panel Executive at: info@hestandards.gov.au

If you wish to provide feedback on any matter raised in this or any other communique, or on other matters to do with proposed Framework, the Panel can be contacted at any time via the Higher Education Standards Executive at:

EMAIL ADDRESS info@HEstandards.gov.au

WEBSITE <http://www.HEstandards.gov.au>

The Panel looks forward to receiving feedback from across the sector and will be providing a report on its analysis of the feedback and any consequent revisions of the proposed Framework. Subject to the issues raised in the feedback, the Panel may hold additional fora with stakeholders before finalising its advice to the Minister for Education.

The Panel is grateful for the generous cooperation, support and constructive feedback it has received in preparing the proposed Framework.

Alan Robson
Chair
Higher Education Standards Panel
June 2014

Distribution of Communiques

It would be helpful if the existing addressees of the Panel's communiques could look to passing the communiques on to interested parties within their constituencies. Anyone who wishes to be added to the distribution list can contact the email address above. Copies of communiques will be uploaded to the Panel's website as soon as practicable after distribution.