Regional Universities Network

SUBMISSION

Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research

Defining Quality for Research Training in Australia Consultation Paper

Introduction

The Regional Universities Network (RUN) is pleased to provide a submission in response to the *Defining Quality for Research Training in Australia* Consultation Paper.

About the Regional Universities Network

The Regional Universities Network was established in October 2011. The foundation members of the Network are:

- CQUniversity
- Southern Cross University
- University of Ballarat
- University of New England
- University of Southern Queensland
- University of the Sunshine Coast.

The objectives of the Network are to:

1. To provide policy advice to government, particularly with regard to tertiary education and regional development.
2. To strengthen and promote the contributions of regional universities to regional and national development.
3. To build institutional capacity and sustainability through the sharing of best practice in educational delivery, training, research and organisational management, particularly with reference to regional contexts.

The importance of research and research training policy to regional Australia

In 2010, our member universities achieved ERA ratings of world standard (3) or above in a diversity of fields of research, including: geochemistry; earth science; agriculture and veterinary science; medical and health science; nursing; environmental science; mathematical science; accounting, auditing and accountability; engineering; human movement and sports science; linguistics; historical studies; and, philosophy. They also achieved ERA ratings of 2 across a range of fields that achieved similar average ratings at the national level.

Our members also have many examples of high quality research activity that do not meet the volume thresholds required for assessment in the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) process. While this is the case for many universities across the country, it poses a particular challenge for our regional universities, which endeavor to meet community expectations of access to a comprehensive range of courses and related disciplines within relatively 'thin' markets compared with metropolitan universities.

Regional universities have a distinctive role to play in the national research and innovation framework, including the provision of research training:

- Regional Australia is at the centre of major national challenges and opportunities including climate change, food security, agricultural production, water security, biosecurity, health services reform and delivery, regional tourism, and the application of technology to learning, health, business and service delivery.
- Strong regions make significant contributions to national prosperity and effective regional development depends on locally embedded applied research.
- Many regional Australians don't have the option of moving to the city to undertake research training. Regional students are twice as likely as students at urban institutions to be caring for dependents. They are also likely to be older than their urban peers and more likely to be female, Indigenous and from a low socioeconomic background.[1]
- Metropolitan universities can benefit significantly from partnerships with regional universities when undertaking research and research training of direct relevance to regional Australia that requires access to regional knowledge, networks, field sites and infrastructure.

Our members acknowledge that, due to a diversity of historical factors, they need to further strengthen their research performance and are investing, within available resources, in building targeted areas of research concentration. The Regional Universities Network also plans to work in partnership with the Centre for Leadership in Research Development at the University of the Sunshine Coast to build research capability across the network members (see Attachment 1 for more information).

For the reasons outlined above, it is in the national interest for government policy to support and create incentives for building research capacity within regional Australia. The Collaborative Research Networks program is an acknowledgement of this and the Regional Universities Network commends the government for this initiative.

Our key concern arising from the Consultation Paper, however, is that the significant efforts of our members, and the clear intention by government, to build strong research capability in our member universities will be seriously diminished if ERA results alone are relied upon as evidence of a quality research training environment, with flow on impacts for the allocation of RTS places and funding. It will also work against the government's equity and regional development objectives.

It will establish a devastating cycle of decline in research capability and research training access within regional Australia:

- Research-active academic staff with excellent track records in HDR supervision whose research outputs fall below the ERA volume thresholds will no longer be able to supervise research candidates, and they will leave regional Australia.
- The recruitment of research-active academics into the regions will become particularly challenging.
- The development and expansion of emerging areas of research activity will be significantly impeded.

[1] ACER (2011) 'Higher education & community benefits: The role of regional provision', *Joining the Dots*, Research Briefing, Vol 1, No. 5, September 2011.

- Barriers to research training for regional students who are older, less mobile and more likely to be from low SES backgrounds than students from urban universities will become even greater than they are already.
- Research effort in areas of specific relevance to rural and remote Australia will decline.

The Regional Universities Network will provide our members with a valuable forum and collaborative framework for redressing the particular challenges we face in building nationally recognised areas of research excellence with a focus on the needs of regional Australia. For the Network to achieve outcomes, however, it will need the support of government policy that acknowledges the historical and current issues impacting on regional universities.

We provide further response to the Consultation Paper in the following sections.

Response to Consultation Questions

Consultation Question 1:
Should there be national minimum quality requirements for higher degrees by research? Should an institution only be eligible for funding schemes in fields where it meets minimum requirements?

Under the new TEQSA quality assurance and regulatory framework, universities will need to demonstrate ongoing compliance with a set of threshold standards, including Provider Registration, Provider Category and Qualification Standards. These standards will cover a range of matters of relevance to higher degrees by research. In particular, universities will need to demonstrate that their Masters by Research and Doctoral programs meet the corresponding specifications (including the levels criteria and qualification type descriptors) described in the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF).

Consistent with the self-accrediting status of universities, and taking appropriate account of the diversity of institutional profiles, fields of research and student populations, the Network believes that it would be inappropriate to prescribe minimum national standards for research training (above and beyond those already implied within the TEQSA threshold standards) or to limit eligibility to funding based on such standards.

Institutions should be required, however, under TEQSA's quality assurance function, to demonstrate that they adopt and enforce policies for the provision of quality higher degrees by research and that these policies are benchmarked against appropriate external frameworks, such as Guidelines developed by national or sectoral groups (e.g. Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies, university network groups).

It is the intention of the Regional Universities Network, in partnership with the Centre for Leadership in Research Development at the University of the Sunshine Coast, to develop Best Practice Guidelines for use by the member universities.

Consultation Questions 2-3:
- Should institutions be required to provide a minimum standard of physical resources in order to receive Research Training Scheme funding?
- Should universities providing research training be required to ensure that students have sufficient access to opportunities such as conference attendance and international study?

It is anticipated that the final TEQSA Threshold Standards will include standards relating to physical and electronic resources and infrastructure and their appropriateness to expected student learning outcomes and the scale, scope, location, mode of delivery and nature of an institution's higher education courses.

With regard to the physical resources required by higher degree by research (HDR) students, the needs of candidates vary widely according to factors such as: field of research, location, mode and type of attendance, level of industry involvement, and personal circumstances. The mandating of national minimum standards would serve to reduce the flexibility of institutions to work with individual students to determine the best fit of resources and facilities to effectively support them.

The Network agrees it is highly desirable for HDR students to have access to opportunities such as conference attendance and international study, within the constraints of RTS funding levels and institutional budgets. Once again, however, prescribed minimum standards will reduce flexibility and could inadvertently introduce barriers to student equity.

As noted earlier, students at regional higher education institutions are twice as likely as students at urban institutions to be caring for dependents. They are also likely to be older than their urban peers and more likely to be female, Indigenous and from a low socioeconomic background. An expectation on students to spend periods of time away from home to attend conferences or undertake international study, and associated impacts on family, dependents and student finances/debt, could serve to discourage participation by a range of equity groups.

Consultation Question 4:
What is the best way of ensuring that PhD supervisors provide high quality support to students? Should requirements be nationally consistent?

Consistent with our response to Question 1, the Network believes that a one-size-fits-all approach to defining requirements for quality supervision would be inappropriate. Rather, institutions should be required to demonstrate that they adopt, implement and enforce policies for the provision of high quality HDR supervision and that these policies are benchmarked against appropriate external frameworks.

It is anticipated that such policies and external frameworks would cover a range of elements, including:

- Criteria for ‘registration’ as a supervisor
- Developmental pathways for new supervisors (e.g. provisional, associate, principal)
- Professional development requirements, including mentoring arrangements
- Workloads
- Performance assessment
- ‘De-registration’ as a supervisor.

Our member universities have policies in place that specify institutional requirements of this nature. Through its partnership with the Centre for the Leadership in Research Development, the Network plans to:

- Develop best practice guidelines for HRD supervision to guide future policy review and improvement
- Develop and deliver professional development programs for supervisors, including shared development of training tools
- Agree policies and systems to facilitate joint supervision arrangements.

Southern Cross University, for example, is developing a second life simulation supervisory training tool as part of a module of a new Graduate Certificate in Educational Practice. All new supervisors will be required to complete this module before becoming eligible to be principal supervisors. The module will be made available to other members of the Network.

Consultation Questions 5 & 6: Alternative evidence (to ERA results) of a quality research environment and arrangements to provide a quality research environment

The Network disputes the claim in the Consultation Paper that the ERA results, on their own, provide evidence of a quality research training environment:

- Research outcomes do not automatically translate to a quality research supervision environment. At the extremes, the opposite could be the case, with research supervisors focusing on their own research outputs to the detriment of their students.
- There are many excellent researchers strongly committed to providing their research students with high quality supervision who are not included in the ERA ratings as their research does not meet the volume threshold requirement.
- The volume thresholds lead to the exclusion of many areas of multidisciplinary research.
- ERA is retrospective and does not reflect emerging areas of research strength.

As noted earlier, we do not support a sole reliance on ERA results for providing evidence of a quality research environment. The Network believes a range of measures should be taken into account for determining the quality of the research training environment, desirably covering inputs, outputs and outcomes.

The overriding emphasis of the Consultation Paper is on qualitative measures of inputs and outputs, rather than outcomes. For example, perhaps the most important measure of the quality of research training is the quality of the research thesis. As highlighted by The Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Graduate Studies (DDOGs) in its *Framework for Best Practice in Doctoral Examination in Australia*, the Australian doctoral examination process has a number of distinctive features compared with Britain, North America and Europe:

1. It relies on external, independent expert examiners to make written recommendations to the University on the acceptability of the thesis
2. Its processes are transparent and arm's-length
3. It is internationally benchmarked because it appoints the best examiners available, irrespective of their geographical location.

The DDOGs estimated in 2005 that 40%-50% of doctoral thesis examiners were international.

Evidence of a quality research training environment, as an alternative or adjunct to ERA results, could include a range of measures, including:

- New staff appointments and their research and HRD supervision experience and outcomes
- Institutional investments in emerging areas of research concentration
- The qualifications and research track records of HRD supervisors and examiners
- Research training outcomes (e.g. HDR candidate publications, completion rates; Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire outcomes).

In addition, the Network supports the proposition in the Consultation Paper that arrangements, such as partnering arrangements with another institution or institutions, could appropriately form part of the evidence base for demonstrating the capacity to provide a quality research training environment.

This should not be limited to joint supervision arrangements and might include other or less formal arrangements, such as:

- Student co-location with other research providers (e.g. CSIRO; industry R&D groups)
- Collaborative arrangements (e.g. joint research grants; joint research development programs)
- Sharing of physical and virtual resources.

The Collaborative Research Networks program is a good example of the sort of arrangements that should be taken into account. Similarly, the collaborative development work that our Network members plan to undertake in partnership with the Centre for Leadership in Research Development represents another appropriate example.

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

The impact of ERA on multidisciplinary research has been an issue of considerable discussion and debate over the recent past. The ERA volume thresholds mean that excellent multidisciplinary research may not always be recognised, which can discourage its further development.

In terms of research training, multidisciplinary research introduces additional complexity for both students and their institutions. In particular, students need to acquire a deep content knowledge and understanding of research methods across a number of fields of research. Employment options at completion may not be as evident as for students working within one clearly defined field of research. The availability of supervisors and examiners who are well qualified and acquainted with working in multidisciplinary contexts can be an issue.

The national research and innovation system needs to strengthen multidisciplinary research capability if it is to effectively respond to key national challenges and opportunities. The research training system represents a significant mechanism for achieving this.

Further research into the barriers would assist institutions and government to determine the most effective policy responses to encourage and support the development of multidisciplinary research training environments.

Consultation Question 8:
Should Australian higher degrees by research include broader skills training? If so, should this be through compulsory coursework or through some other mechanism?

The Network is supportive of the need for HDR students to have access to broader skills training aligned with their future career aspirations and institutions should be required to have policies in place to provide this training.

An individual student's non-compulsory training 'package' should be designed with the student and flexibly delivered in the form of learning modules, with appropriate documentary evidence of the training undertaken being provided on completion of each module. Some institutions may choose to accredit Graduate Certificates or Graduate Diplomas for this purpose.

Learning modules should include a range of options, including: formal award subjects; completion of an industry project; an assessed multidisciplinary team project; and, online learning modules.

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

The Network supports greater flexibility in the Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) scholarships program.

It is very difficult to attract good research candidates in those fields that are in high demand by industry (e.g. engineering, mining, geology) as salaries are so high, which only exacerbates the skill shortages over the longer term. We believe that rules relating to additional income earned by APA scholarship holders should be relaxed, including the amounts that institutions can offer as top-ups to scholarships.

With the high proportion of research candidates being mature-aged and undertaking their research training on a part-time basis, there also needs to be greater flexibility to offer proportional scholarships for part-time candidates.

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 role of the research masters degree in Australia is diverse. For some industries, for example, with a critical shortage of research capability (e.g. mining, geology), it provides an avenue for responding to skill gaps in shorter timeframes than is possible with PhD programs.

The research masters provides an entry pathway to the doctorate for students who do not have an Honours degree and also an exit qualification for research candidates who have completed a substantial body of work but are unable, for a variety to possible reasons, to complete their PhD.

Given the decline in Australia of the Bachelor Honours degree and the research masters degree, however, we believe it is timely for the higher education sector to reconsider how research training pathways within Australia might be reconfigured over the medium to longer term to better reflect international trends.

Consultation Question 11:
Given the trend towards more diverse entry pathways for higher degrees by research, how prescriptive should overlying principles be? How should institutional arrangements for student selection and admission be measured?

Entry pathways and arrangements for student selection and admission need to be rigorously mapped but will vary significantly across different contexts and disciplines and consequently should not be mandated or prescriptive.

Consistent with our earlier responses, the Network proposes that institutions be required to demonstrate the adoption and enforcement of institutional policies relating to entry pathways and student selection and admission that have been benchmarked against appropriate external frameworks such as Best Practice Guidelines developed by peak bodies or groupings of institutions.

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Attachment 1

Centre for Leadership in Research Development

The Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR) has established the Collaborative Research Networks (CRN) scheme in order to assist eligible universities to become more research intensive.

Under CRN, DIISR has funded the Centre for Leadership in Research Development (CLRD) at the University of the Sunshine Coast. The overall purpose of the CLRD is to support research development at USC and other less research-intensive universities through production and dissemination of programs and resources.

The Regional Universities Network plans to work in partnership with CLRD to progress a number of initiatives to support the development of research and research training capability across its members.

The partnership proposal is under development, however, it is proposed that the network members will collaborate in areas such as:

- The development of research training Best Practice Guidelines, reflecting the regional missions of the Network members, and including generic capabilities, selection and admission, supervision and examination
- Professional development of HDR supervisors
- The development of training modules for HDR students
- Arrangements for joint supervision.