Support for Students Policy Guidelines – IRU Response

Summary:

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) supports:

- That universities should have a "Support for Students Policy" that identifies students at risk of failing and interventions to support completion.
- Support for Students Policy Guidelines (the "Guidelines") that outline the broad purposes of the Support for Students Policy and mandatory obligations.
- Consultation with the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) for advice on the effectiveness of the Higher Education Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021 for supporting students.

The IRU recommends:

- The HESP advice on the efficacy of the Threshold Standards be considered prior to finalising any mandatory obligations in the Guidelines.
- If the HESP advises that the Threshold Standards sufficiently describes (or could be amended to describe) what quality providers should be doing to support students, then the need for mandatory obligations in the Guidelines should be reconsidered.
- If the HESP advises that there is a need for a Support for Students Policy, then the Guidelines should be developed in consultation with the HESP.
- Reporting and compliance should be the responsibility of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA).
- Mandatory obligations in the Guidelines should be piloted in 2024, with implementation in 2025.

The Innovative Research Universities (IRU) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Support for Students Policy Guidelines (the "Guidelines") and reporting arrangements. The IRU supports the goals of the Support for Students Policy, including the obligation to identify students at risk of failing, offer interventions to support completion and ensure students are aware of support available. The Support for Students Policy may also bring a more systematic approach to reporting on student support and success. The IRU also supports the principle that mandatory obligations in the Guidelines do not extend beyond what quality higher education providers already offer.

The key concern of the IRU is that the Guidelines are being developed prior to the Minister for Education receiving advice from the Higher Education Standards Panel (HESP) on the application of the Threshold Standards in relation to student support. The HESP advice on the efficacy of the Threshold Standards should precede the finalisation of the Guidelines, particularly mandatory obligations. This will ensure complementarity between the Threshold Standards and any new requirements under the Guidelines.

The IRU also recommends that the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) is responsible for reporting and compliance with the Guidelines, avoiding regulatory duplication. We also recommend that the Guidelines focus on the overarching principles, maintaining a focus on the outcomes rather than the means, limiting annual reporting to elements available through existing routine data, and piloting mandatory requirements in 2024. We outline these suggestions below.

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Ensuring complementarity between the Guidelines and the Threshold Standards

The Guidelines consultation paper acknowledges that the Threshold Standards requires universities to undertake many of the services and responsibilities outlined in the proposed Guidelines, including:

- equivalent opportunities for students of all backgrounds to succeed;
- identifying students at risk of unsatisfactory progress and providing specific support;
- providing access and information on available support, including emergency services, health services, counselling, legal advice, advocacy, accommodation and welfare services.

The HESP has the expertise to advise on how the Guidelines could complement the Threshold Standards and be implemented, including financial penalties for non-compliance. If the HESP advice is that the Threshold Standards sufficiently describes what quality providers should be doing to support student retention, then the need for mandatory obligations in the Guidelines should be reconsidered. If the Threshold Standards can be amended (or implemented differently) to achieve the broader goals of the Support for Students Policy, then this should be pursued in the first instance. This will ensure that the Guidelines focus on extending upon or complementing the Threshold Standards, rather than duplicating.

Minimising regulatory overlap through TEQSA

The overall impact of the policy – positively improving student experience or negatively increasing regulatory compliance burden – will depend on how prescriptive the Guideline requirements are and how they are implemented. Given the complementary (and possibly overlapping) goals of the Support for Students Policy and the Threshold Standards, TEQSA is better placed to be responsible for compliance with implementation. If the Guidelines are to be implemented by the Department of Education, there is a need for clarity about how the functions and responsibilities Department will relate to TEQSA. The regulatory responsibility for the Guidelines should also be considered in light of a possible Tertiary Education Commission through the Australian Universities Accord process.

Guidelines focusing on overarching principles, rather than means

The Guidelines should avoid being too prescriptive and outline the overarching principles of the Support for Student Policy, focusing on the outcomes rather than specifying the means for achieving them. This could include a list of required and desirable mechanisms for identifying students at risk of failing (e.g. pre-census triggers for support), interventions to support completion (e.g. targeted in-course support from academics) and program evaluation of student support initiatives. Institutions should be left to decide how mechanisms will be implemented. For example, universities have different academic calendars and census dates, and should be free to administer the Support for Students Policy in the most appropriate way. Likewise, all universities should have identifiable support for Indigenous students and English-language support for students who need it, but the Guidelines do not need to be prescriptive about how this is provided.

Review the National Code for overseas students for relevance to domestic students

The National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students offers a useful framework for domestic students. However, the Code also requires an identifiable personal contact point for students and it could be challenging for some institutions to scale this for all

domestic students. There should be a dedicated review of the Code – similar to the HESP review of the Threshold Standards – for identification of the elements relevant to the domestic student cohort. This will ensure the Support for Students Policy maintains complementarity with other legislation.

Annual reporting for routine data, biennial reporting for qualitative support

There is a risk that the reporting requirements will come at the detriment of resources available to supporting students. Striking an appropriate balance could be achieved by limiting annual reporting to elements available through existing routine data and compliance reporting, with biennial reporting for qualitative or personal support arrangements for individual students. For example, data collected as part of the Tertiary Collection of Student Information (TCSI) could be reported annually as a "check" on how providers are performing, repurposing the current reporting for the goals of the Support for Students Policy. Reporting on personal support arrangements for individual students could become very time consuming at scale if data is not readily available in central university systems. Qualitative reporting – including evidence of support when students still fail despite receiving support – could be part of biennial reporting.

Clarity over non-compliance thresholds

Greatest compliance difficulties will be how to provide evidence of support when students still fail and how to demonstrate compliance against subjectively determined thresholds. Non-compliance measures contained in the Consultation Paper appear subjective (e.g. applying the policy "diligently"; ensuring "sufficient resourcing" is available to support all students requiring additional assistance; how complaints will be investigated) and punitive (e.g. publication and shaming of non-compliance; financial penalties). It is unclear how the threshold for (non-)compliance will be determined.

The Department should also consider whether the purely punitive approach will incentivise improvements beyond the minimum standards. There is a risk that the compliance thresholds could extend beyond what is practical and implementable. This is particularly the case for non-academic supports, such as financial assistance and crisis response. These will differ by individual student, student cohort and university. We agree that a "one size fits all" response to the minimum policy requirements is not appropriate, but in the absence of additional public funding for student support, some of the requirements may be beyond the capability and financial capacity of universities in some geographical localities, particularly those with campuses in disadvantaged communities.

Pilot in 2024, with full implementation in 2025

The Consultation paper states that "higher education providers will be given time to implement their Support for students policies". Requiring these to be full implemented by first semester 2024 does not provide sufficient time to incorporate the requirements into internal policy frameworks and practices. Piloting the Support for Students Policy in 2024, including a self-report against the requirements and plan for progress against best practice for full implementation in 2025, will better ensure universities can achieve a positive and sustainable difference for students over the long term.