Support for Students Policy Guidelines: Murdoch University Response

Summary

Murdoch University has a strategic mandate to build a culturally safe and supportive environment where all members of our community can realise their potential. We do so by providing a supportive and flexible educational environment that adapts to our students rather than requiring our students to adapt to it. In this context Murdoch University welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Support for Students Policy Guidelines and associated reporting requirements.

Murdoch University recommends that:

- The Guidelines allow universities to change the way they support, scaffold and remediate students to match their cohort – 'non-traditional students call for non-traditional support programs'.

- Quality and effectiveness of student support programs should be an internal responsibility, with oversight through standard TEQSA quality assurance processes.

- A dedicated funding pool should be made available to support rigorous program evaluation at the institutional level to account for the specific circumstances of the communities they serve.

- A limited number of key targets should be identified, with monitoring by TEQSA using standard data.

- The uneven impact across the sector of regulatory and compliance change on institutional costs and reporting burden needs to be recognised, with TEQSA/Department of Education support through 2024 to assist universities to be compliant for implementation in 2025.

Murdoch University has participated in the development of and supports the response to the Guidelines submitted by the Innovative Research Universities. In particular, we support the IRU recommendations for the integration of HESP advice on the efficacy of Threshold Standards into any mandatory requirements, the primacy of TEQSA in reporting and compliance, and a 2024 pilot for any new mandatory obligations.

Institutional support frameworks versus system-wide regulation

The demographics of the sector are changing. This is occurring through external factors, such as populations shifts and workforce demands, as well as through deliberate institutional strategies of diversity and inclusion. Universities need to **change their student support strategies and offerings to meet the needs of these new/expanded student cohorts**.

Admissions standards managed through the Higher Education Standards (HES) Admission Transparency rules can allow universities to develop entry criteria that recognise the potential of students from non-traditional backgrounds. In addition, the HES enable universities to change the way they teach and remediate students to match their cohort. This requires institutions to be 'radically teaching focused', assess preparedness, and have robust quality assurance processes.

Together these mechanisms ensure **universities understand their cohort and are able to identify different scaffolding, support and pedagogical needs**. Prescriptive regulation would restrict institutional options to develop and implement support programs to meet these identified needs.

Institutional self-accreditation processes can accommodate developing entry standards, pedagogies, and aligned student support programs that are effective for their community, with oversight of quality assurance processes by TEQSA.

If institutions continue to work with the same assumptions, the same processes, and the same support mechanisms - but with a very different student cohort - then it is unlikely that student success measures will change significantly.

Universities need to consider the way in which their rules of conduct, pedagogy, curriculum policies, literacy and numeracy support, and their strategic focus work *in concert* to provide overarching student support. In doing so, universities should act to make support mechanisms less complex and stressful and, based on an understanding of their cohort, make the opportunities for students to realise their potential better.

The *Student Support Guidelines* **should enable institutional flexibility through identifying key principles**, including program evaluation, **without prescribing the means for achieving desired outcomes**.

Prioritisation, Funding and Measurement

Murdoch University's deep commitment to supporting students is illustrated by the number of initiatives we have implemented to support incoming and current students. These initiatives align with our institutional strategies and the identified needs of our student cohorts.

It is our view that a significant proportion of the population can find educational success, but some require greater resources, time, and effort to ensure their success. The allocation of funding to specific programs by universities recognises the salience of those programs to their cohort of students and considered prioritisation of financial resources.

The **resources required to not only attract these students but also provide sufficient supports and pathways cannot be underestimated**. This **requires flexibility to implement programs according to institutional priorities and explicit acknowledgement and recognition of differentiation in resource allocation**.

Different measures will be of strategic importance to institutions, depending on the needs of their student population and applicant catchment.

Murdoch University has amassed data regarding the efficacy of our student support initiatives. We would, however, like to undertake further program evaluation, strengthening the data collected and conducting more detailed analyses and research surrounding these initiatives. It is our view that **a dedicated funding pool should be made available to support rigorous program evaluation at the institutional leve**l where universities see a need for additional research that **accounts for the specific circumstances of the communities they serve**.

Regulatory framework and cost burden

Prescriptive regulation constrains innovation and creativity, leading to emulation rather than innovation across the sector. Scope should be provided to enable **universities to change the way they support, scaffold and remediate students to match their cohort – 'non-traditional students call for non-traditional support programs'.**

The quality and effectiveness of support programs should be an institutional responsibility. Quality assurance (QA) should have the capacity to recognise new and innovative support models, as well as incorporating non-traditional expertise and ways of thinking.

Murdoch University remains of the view that **QA should be consolidated within the TEQSA framework**, with a **limited number of key targets identified and monitored using standard data** (TCSI, Financial reporting).

The **proportionate cost of regulation per student in smaller institutions is significantly higher than in larger providers both in terms of actual financial costs and resources**. In addition and as indicated above, different institutions use data in different ways and have a range of approaches to data management, processing and analysis based on their priorities and strategic direction. The extent of additional activity involved in meeting external reporting requirements will depend on the current activities of each university.

The troubled TCSI implementation has illustrated **the effect of significant regulatory and compliance change on institutional costs and reporting burden**, and the uneven impact across the sector. It is critical that **sufficient time be allowed and resources allocated to resolve any reporting requirements before implementation** of any compliance regime. Further, Murdoch recommends that TEQSA/Department of Education support institutions throughout 2024 to assist them to be compliant for implementation in 2025.