

### Feedback on the Support for Student Policy Guidelines Consultation Paper

The University of New England (UNE) supports the intention to provide greater transparency and surety to students in relation to the support mechanisms available to them at to help them to succeed in their studies. UNE's principal concern with the proposal in the Consultation paper relates to the structure and content of the Guidelines, and the potential impost of further reporting.

The requirement to address specific topics in a single policy represents a substantial overreach into the management and governance arrangements of self-accrediting institutions and are not necessary to achieve the objectives of the legislation.

- The requirement to include policy and process elements in that single policy dictates not only the how the institution addresses the subject matter of the policy but also its very policy architecture. Good practice distinguishes policy and procedure, and many institutions accordingly make a considered decision through their Council to separate policy and procedure in their governance architecture. Dictating governance arrangements in this way is a further fundamental incursion on the management and governance arrangements of self-accrediting institutions.
- The Guidelines seek to address two objectives – that institutions have mechanisms to ensure student success and that students are made aware of those mechanisms and have access to them. Neither requires this incursion into institutional self-governing and self-accrediting status.
- Instead, institutions could be required to provide evidence of (a) how their suite of policy and practice documents meet the criteria of the guidelines and (b) how those policy and practices are communicated and made available to students. While students should be provided with a single point of truth for all avenues of support available from their higher education providers, how this is done should not be the primary concern of the Department. Compliance with the requirements should not be focused on the form of the policy but rather on the activity and associated outcomes driven by these policies.

As to the substance of the Guidelines, it is unclear on what evidence each of the points in the guidelines is based, or if they are an expression of good practice, and it is unclear if there is some form of prioritisation amongst the lists.

If the Guidelines are to impose specific and discrete requirements, they should be accompanied by reference to evidence, and this is especially important in relation to the requirement to review pedagogical and teaching design.

#### Regulatory proportionality.

As part of UNE's response to the Universities Accord Interim Report, UNE urged the panel and Department to ensure that new reporting and compliance measures are designed in way that ensures they are effective in achieving the underlying policy objectives and proportionate to the size and scope of both the risk they are addressing and the individual institutions that must comply with them.

To that end, UNE would urge the department to consider a scalable approach to the implementation of reporting and compliance with any new requirements which could be aligned to specific institutional missions and activities as outlined in a mission based compact, as opposed to a blanket regulation that does not consider institutional characteristics.

#### Funding arrangements for 2024 and 2025

Further clarity is needed regarding the expectation that excess funding is focused on student support. Specific requirements, measures and metrics need to be released for discussion.

Extra distinct reporting obligations should not be imposed unless this data is not already available in the sector-level data sets managed by the Department. This existing information should provide evidence of the efficacy of universities' current endeavours to support specific student cohorts and could be used to determine an appropriate performance baseline.

#### Current Student Support Measures

*Consultation Question 1: Are there features of the Code that could be applied to domestic student support and included in the guidelines?*

*Consultation Question 2: How do we ensure that the Code and the New Arrangements work effectively together?*

UNE cautions against duplication of requirements in the National Code and in the Guidelines. If elements of the Code are adopted in the Guidelines, the Guidelines will provide the structure for university policies and process and those elements do not need to be repeated in the Code.

Incorporating elements in both instruments" doubles reporting and compliance burdens without a

corresponding benefit and risks divergence between the elements in the two instruments as they are reviewed and amended separately.

UNE recommends that the guidelines are harmonised with best features of the Code and the existing Threshold Standards to make sure that support for domestic students is fit for purpose for international students as well, and that all students receive a consistent approach to basic support. If this is done in a considered fashion, providers who meet the requirements for domestic student support should meet requirements for international student support with minimal extra effort. The National Code for overseas students should be reviewed to ensure it focuses solely on the extra requirements for providers that are beyond the requirements of the student support policy guidelines and are seen as tailored measures of support rather than a separate set of requirements. UNE recommends that there be a single reporting and compliance activity that addresses both the Code and the New Arrangements.

#### [Changes to Higher Education Provider Guidelines](#)

*Consultation Question 3: What other detail should be included in the Guidelines and why?*

*Consultation Question 4: Are the proposed individual student and institutional level requirements practical, and implementable? If not, how could they be improved?*

*Consultation Question 5: Are there examples of best practice, reports and reviews that focus on supporting students to complete their studies, that could be drawn on for the Guidelines?*

The Department should consider including a requirement in the guidelines for culturally safe and appropriate support for First Nations students, that is developed in partnership with the relevant institutional advisory bodies.

Providers should be encouraged to deliver a model of support that is not prescriptive but is flexible and acknowledges that some students have intersectional experiences of disadvantage with work to multiply barriers to engagement when first coming to higher education.

Consideration should also be given to ensuring that students are provided with appropriate advice about support available to them which is beyond the expertise of universities and is better provided by professional services such as emergency mental health services, etc. The intention here should not be to abrogate the responsibility of universities in relation to addressing these issues but should ensure that students get the best possible support in emergency situations. Students must be directed to the most appropriate source of support within the community, and while this support



**Office of Strategy Management**  
University of New England  
Armidale NSW 2351  
Australia  
**Phone** 61 2 6773 5055  
**Strategy.management@une.edu.au**  
**www.une.edu.au**

may well lie beyond the university, the university should provide advice on access to it. In regional areas, providers may be at a disadvantage in relation to the provision of support by external providers available to students who are outside metropolitan centres. As such, the guidelines need to make sure they are reflective of the diverse range of institutions in the Australian higher education environment.

The guidelines must also recognise that support for students does not look the same for all student cohorts. The guidelines should include a focus on evidence-based intervention and practice which is cohort specific.

The proposed guidelines are overly prescriptive. It is unclear on what evidence each of the points in the guidelines are based, or if they are an expression of good practice, and it is unclear if there is some form of prioritisation amongst the lists.

Ideally, if the requirements are to be specific and discrete, they should be accompanied by reference to evidence, and this is especially important in relation to the requirement to review pedagogical and teaching design.

The mandate to include these things in a single policy represents a substantial overreach into the management and governance arrangements of self-accrediting individual. Instead, institutions should be required to provide evidence of how their suite of policy and practice documents meet the criteria of the guidelines. While students should be provided with a single point of truth for all avenues of support available from their higher education providers, how this is done should not be the primary concern of the Department. Compliance with the requirements should be overly focused on the form of the policy but rather on the activity and associated outcomes driven by these policies.

There is a large body of evidence-based research, and sector experience grounded in best practice by which the guidelines could be informed. However, the support required by different student cohorts is extremely nuanced and varied. It is appropriate that the proposed guidelines capture a wide range of requirements without being overly prescriptive. However, the guidelines could specify that institutions need to take an evidence-based approach to student support, including periodic benchmarking of institutional practice against the sector, against best-practice guidance notes, and international exemplars. Consideration should be given to using the findings of the existing HEPPP (Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program) and National Priority and Industry Linkage Fund Pilot Program to inform future iterations of the guidelines.

## Reporting

*Consultation Question 5: What other reporting requirements need to be included to demonstrate compliance with the Support for Students Policy requirements?*

*Consultation question 6: Is there other information that should be reported, or that could be repurposed, that would demonstrate compliance, and assist in monitoring and evaluating the outcome of the guidelines?*

*Consultation Question 7: Is there other information that should be reported, or that could be repurposed, that would demonstrate compliance, and assist in monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of these Guidelines?*

In relation to reporting, it is crucial that where possible, existing data reporting and collection activities are used for this purpose as opposed to creating a further reporting burden on institutions and the Department. Cohort data is available as part of the existing higher education data collection activities and should be useful to determine longer term improvements because of the policy and guidelines. Reporting should be done on an annual basis.

Where an institution has identified key areas of focus in relation to student support either due to student cohort characteristics, or mission specific activities these things could be included as part of an Institution's mission based compact.

As UNE made clear in its submission to the Interim report of the Australian Universities Accord panel, continuing to burden universities with extra compliance and regulatory requirements places a significant burden on already stretched finances and resources. Consideration must be given to financial support of the proposed reporting mechanism requires universities to undertake extra work to set up monitoring and reporting systems beyond those which are already in use.

## Compliance and non-compliance

*Consultation Question 8: What needs to be taken into account in the Department's approach to non-compliance?*

The Department of Education, and the Regulator have mature and well understood monitoring, evaluation, and compliance powers. UNE would urge the Department to release a regulatory impact statement outlining the expected impact on providers in complying with new requirements under the Act and Guidelines.

If reporting requirements are built into an organisation's mission based compact, compliance or non-compliance will become evident. While transparency of institutional performance in this regard is vital, punitive measures are unproductive, damaging to the sector as a whole and should be used only where there is a significant breach of regulation due to actual negligence and wilful disregard of the guidelines which has resulted in actual harm.

Where possible, institutions should be required to self-monitor and given the opportunity to proactively discuss non-compliance with the Department in the first instance. This could be supported by the development of a plan (duly agreed and appropriately monitored) to establish a path to compliance before penalties are applied.

As noted in the discussion paper, the Tertiary Collection of Student Information system can flag threshold issues in the data. Consideration should be given to extending this function across a wider range of indicators to flag sooner to the provider and the Department when there appears heightened risk of non-compliance. Early notification and intervention are going to be key to delivering timely solutions for students, and this must remain the focus of any compliance exercise.

### Implementation

*Consultation Question 9: What practical considerations need to be taken into account in implementing the Guidelines?*

To accurately determine the cost of implementation the sector needs to understand what constitutes minimum requirements, including measures and metrics associated with success, and the timing for implementation will be scaled up from 'minimum' to 'full.' Although it is likely that most providers are already meeting or exceeding the minimum requirements, until the reporting impost is better articulated it is difficult to accurately assess the effort required in implementing new reporting and monitoring schemes. As previously noted, a Regulatory Impact Statement would assist to understand the overall impact on the sector. Consideration should also be given to providing funding smaller, less wealthy institutions to meet reporting obligations as soon as possible.