

# Australian Catholic University

## Feedback to the Department of Education

### *Support for Students Policy: Guidelines Consultation Paper*

September 2023

## **Feedback on the *Support for Students Policy: Guidelines Consultation Paper***

Australian Catholic University (ACU) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the federal Department of Education on its consultation on the proposed new *Support for Students Policy* guidelines (Guidelines).

ACU acknowledges the Federal Government's initiative to seek to ensure that strong supports are available to assist students to successfully complete their studies, particularly as more Australians enter higher education. Australian universities, including ACU, have a range of existing policies in place to support student success, and the proposed new Guidelines may well serve to synthesise and further strengthen current arrangements.

As currently presented, however, ACU recommends further refinement of the draft Guidelines. They should provide clear guidance to higher education providers on the scope and limits of their obligations under the new arrangements – particularly with respect to supports that are non-academic in nature – and to avoid unintended outcomes.

ACU would also emphasise that while any new arrangements should provide clear guidance to providers on their obligations with respect to student support services, they should not be unduly rigid and prescriptive. The Guidelines and associated reporting and compliance requirements should afford providers sufficient scope to adapt their student supports having regard to their particular student profile and institutional mission. A 'one-size-fits-all' approach to implementation and regulation should be avoided.

Furthermore, the implementation process should afford providers sufficient time and support to develop their individual *Support for Students Policy* in accordance with the Guidelines, and to establish processes to deliver on any new reporting and compliance obligations. The implementation timeline should recognise that this may be both time and resource intensive for many institutions.

ACU provides the following feedback on the consultation questions.

<b>1. Are there features of the Code that could also be applied to domestic student support and included in the Guidelines?</b>
---

The Consultation Paper notes that higher education providers (HEPs) enrolling international students must comply with the *National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018* (hereafter "Code") and seeks feedback on whether any provisions in the Code could be incorporated into the proposed new Guidelines, for application to domestic students.

ACU submits that any new requirements for domestic student support should be developed discretely.

It is important to recognise the Code has been developed specifically for international students. The students to which it applies are subject to prescriptive visa conditions, and require specific types of cultural support. Although the Code contains provisions relating to "student support services" amongst others, it should not be assumed that they are equally relevant to domestic students. There is also a risk that applying Code-based solutions to domestic students ultimately will not be useful and may dilute the resources HEPs currently dedicate to international students.

ACU would therefore urge the government to exercise caution in considering the application of the Code's provisions to domestic students.

Reforms concerning student support should be implemented through appropriate amendments to the *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* (HESF), and dedicated guidelines. This process may also entail reflecting on, and taking into consideration, formal input from students on how providers can best provide academic and non-academic supports.

## **2. How do we ensure that the Code and the new arrangements work together effectively?**

For the reasons identified above, ACU submits that arrangements pertaining to the Code and the proposed new Guidelines should be kept structurally separate.

Once the new Guidelines are developed, there would be benefit in ensuring that HEPs are well informed about the new provisions and the implications of such reforms for the student experience and student support services, for both domestic and international students.

## **3. What other detail should be included in the Guidelines and why?**

The Guidelines should clearly specify the scope and limits of a HEP's obligations, especially with respect to support that extends beyond traditional academic support. This is currently lacking in the Consultation Paper.

It would be unreasonable to expect HEPs to meet poorly defined requirements, especially where penalties are attached. ACU notes the Consultation Paper lists a range of information a HEP's *Support for Students Policy* must include but also explicitly states "this list is not exhaustive". Furthermore, many of the provisions listed are in themselves very broad and open-ended. For example, the new Guidelines as currently presented would require HEPs to have a policy in place which includes "arrangements to provide non-academic supports for students, *such as* financial assistance, housing information and mental health supports" [emphasis added] (Consultation Paper, p. 8). Clearer guidance for HEPs on this provision and its parameters is needed.

The HESF articulates a HEP's obligations regarding formal and informal learning environments, diversity and equity, and wellbeing and safety. The final Guidelines should clearly position non-academic support in these terms. Creating a binary distinction between 'academic' and 'non-academic' support will prove unhelpful if 'non-academic' supports become dislocated from the academic needs of students.

ACU also notes the proposal in the Consultation Paper that HEPs should include, amongst others, the following in a *Support for Students Policy*:

*Processes to ensure that students are connected to support, and that non-engagement with support triggers escalations before the census date wherever possible. (p. 8)*

ACU seeks further information on what this would require for practical implementation, and whether there would be an expectation of minimum student attendance and/or engagement in classroom activity before the census date.

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

There are several issues with the wording and provisions for inclusion in the new Guidelines, as proposed in the Consultation Paper, with respect to individual student and institutional level requirements. These issues should be given careful consideration.

As written, a HEP may be obliged to deem a student 'at risk' based on 'non-academic' suitability. Therefore, there is a significant risk such provisions may result in unintended consequences; reforms that are intended to support students may actually result in marginalising them.

There is also a risk of undermining well-established admissions methods. For example, if a student enters a program on a high ATAR and triggers a pre-census date at-risk alert (such as non-submission of assessment or non-engagement with a learning management system (LMS)), asking a provider to 'assess academic suitability' is impractical. The admissions systems used in Australia see HEPs use ATARs as evidence of academic suitability. It would be unhelpful to undermine this well-established system.

Furthermore, ACU is concerned that requiring HEPs to assess ‘non-academic suitability’ *and* also using student retention (currently a post-census date calculation) as a measure for compliance, may result in vulnerable students being shepherded out of study. Although it is clear the government’s intention is for the assessment of non-academic suitability to lead to *support*, the provisions as currently presented could equally amount to *sanctions*. There is a real risk that in some instances it may be easier for HEPs (particularly those with a competitive advantage in the sector with respect to student recruitment) to dispense with, rather than support, students in need of support services.

With respect to the proposed institutional level requirements, caution should be taken in using the following wording in the Guidelines:

*“There is access to trained academic development advisors who specialise in identifying the reasons why students struggle and assembling the right response for individual students.”*  
(Consultation Paper, p. 9)

The current HESF gives HEPs broad scope to make determinations around their staffing using:

- a) suitability and capability to teach;
- b) qualification level regarding teaching at particular AQF levels; and
- c) professional equivalence.

The aforementioned wording is problematic and suggests HEPs would need to hire and train a specific cohort of staff that are specialised in a very narrow field. If adopted as currently presented, the provision is likely to have unintended consequences for the sector if it generates and designates a new class of higher education worker. More general wording should be adopted, aligning with the relevant provisions in the HESF with respect to staffing.

ACU would also recommend removing the provision that a *Support for Students Policy* “must be updated on an annual basis” (Consultation Paper, p. 9) and replacing it with the words “must be updated regularly”. ACU considers this is more enabling language and therefore better suited to guidelines.

**6. What other reporting requirements need to be included to demonstrate compliance with the *Support for students policy* requirements?**

**7. Is there other information that should be reported, or that could be re-purposed, that would demonstrate compliance, and assist in monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of these Guidelines?**

**8. What needs to be taken into account in the Department’s approach to non-compliance?**

The provisions on the reporting obligations of HEPs need to be given considered thought and require further development.

Further advice is particularly needed on how the government intends to measure and assess “the efficacy and effectiveness” of a HEP’s *Support for Students Policy* and what information HEPs would be expected to provide in their periodic reports to the Minister in this regard (Consultation Paper, p. 9).

Furthermore, as presented in the Consultation Paper, HEPs would seemingly be required to identify which of their students receive support and which do not. Ultimately, all students are supported by HEPs in a variety of ways. If the intention is that HEPs should report on new or existing measures, the Guidelines should make this clear.

Consideration should also be given to how the new reporting obligations would connect with HEP’s existing reporting obligations, including reporting timelines. The objective should be to minimise the regulatory burden placed on institutions and for simplified reporting requirements which promote administrative efficiency.

With respect to reporting on student academic progression and outcomes, it is important to recognise that these metrics can be affected by factors other than student support. Directly connecting them with

student support and reporting/compliance obligations could also inadvertently create upward pressure on HEPs who have a competitive advantage to seek to remove identified/poorer performing students pre-census date.

There is also a risk that adopting a ‘one-size-fits all’ approach to reporting may result in misleading comparisons being made between HEPs; for example, if leagues tables are generated for the sector based on HEPs’ reports or compliance outcomes. To illustrate, if a metropolitan-based HEP reports a lower HELP expenditure on failed units of study compared to a regional/rural HEP, this does not necessarily suggest a deficit on the part of the latter provider. Any new reporting and compliance requirements should seek to acknowledge the nuances and/or variances that may be present across institutions and different student profiles.

## **9. What practical considerations need to be taken into account in implementing the Guidelines?**

HEPs should be given adequate time and support to implement the Guidelines, and to establish the necessary processes to deliver on any new reporting and compliance obligations.

At ACU, for instance, there are a range of existing initiatives and policies in place to support student success. These include an Academic Skills Unit, Access and Disability Service (which plays an important role in working with neurodiverse students and students with disability to develop Education Inclusion Plans), Counselling Services, Indigenous Higher Education Units on each campus, Student Advocacy Service, Student Veterans’ Support Program, and a range of additional specific services offered to international students. As a public Catholic university, ACU also particularly seeks to create a compassionate and inclusive learning environment for students aligned to ACU’s institutional mission. This includes a commitment to pastoral care and student-centred approaches to learning and teaching.

Existing policies, processes and initiatives as well as provisions for non-academic supports across the University will need to be synthesised and reviewed against the new Guidelines. Additional resources will also likely need to be directed to establish processes to ensure delivery on any new reporting and compliance obligations required by the government’s reforms.

As the Guidelines are still under development and given HEPs will require time to respond accordingly, ACU suggests that 2024 should be a preparatory year for the sector to act on the reforms, with the aim of commencing implementation from 2025. ACU proposes the first year of implementation should also involve a two-way dialogue and constructive feedback between the government and HEPs about the design and practical operation of their *Support for Student Policies*, without formal enforcement and imposition of penalties. This would serve to smoothen the implementation process and address any unintended consequences.

As indicated, HEPs will need time to draft their *Support for Students Policies* and reform existing student supports as necessary to comply with the new obligations (which may also require recruiting additional staff). This includes implementing and evaluating the mechanisms of a *Support for Students Policy*, particularly elements of the proposals as currently presented involving:

- a) evaluating student outcomes including academic progression; and
- b) performance obligations that are tied to punitive non-compliance measures in the form of civil penalties.

With respect to support and resourcing for providers to implement the reforms, ACU notes the Federal Government’s recent decision to extend the Higher Education Continuity Guarantee (HECG) into 2024 and 2025, with funding arrangements to prioritise support for equity students. At a minimum, therefore, ACU would suggest that universities should be able to use HECG funding to deliver on the *Support for Students Policy* reforms, noting the expectation that many new higher education students are likely to be from equity groups.

Finally, HEPs should be advised on whether the government intends to make their reports and compliance outcomes publicly available at an individual institutional or aggregated sector level and/or through the QILT (or similar) platform.

## Appendix A: About Australian Catholic University (ACU)

An ACU education builds on the Catholic understanding of faith and reason working together in pursuit of knowledge and promotion of human dignity and the common good.

An ACU education seeks to transform lives and communities. Students are challenged to look beyond the classroom, solve real-world problems, develop their own search for meaning and cultivate strong professional ethics. They are invited to stand up for people in need and causes that matter.

ACU is open to all. As is common with great Catholic institutions the world over, the university is inclusive and supportive of everyone, every day – regardless of their faith or tradition.

ACU is a young university making a serious impact. We're ranked in the top two per cent of universities worldwide<sup>1</sup> and in the top 10 Catholic universities.<sup>2</sup> The university has seven campuses around Australia, a campus in Rome, Italy, and an online campus – ACU Online.

Opportunities for personal and professional growth are critical to ACU. This is a university of service – so much so that it is built into the curricula. All ACU courses offer work placements, internships, or volunteering opportunities.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings 2023. Percentage calculated as ACU's world rank as a proportion of the total number of universities in the world: *International Handbook of Universities 2019*, Palgrave MacMillan.

<sup>2</sup> International Federation of Catholic Universities members ranked on *Times Higher Education* World University Rankings 2023.