



## TEQSA social cohesion roundtable meeting with university managers – 15 November 2024 (1:30-3:30pm AEDT)

### Context for the meeting

- The purpose of this meeting was to facilitate discussion across the sector, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the experiences, challenges, and learnings from universities that experienced protests on campus in 2024 related to the ongoing conflict in the Middle East.
- The meeting was facilitated by Professor Braden Hill, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Students, Equity and Indigenous), Edith Cowan University.
- The meeting included participants from the following universities:
  - Australian National University
  - Curtin University
  - Deakin University
  - La Trobe University
  - Macquarie University
  - Monash University
  - RMIT University
  - University of Adelaide
  - University of Melbourne
  - University of Newcastle
  - University of Queensland
  - University of Sydney
  - University of Tasmania
  - University of Wollongong.
- The comments raised at the meeting, summarised below, are not definitive and do not represent TEQSA's final position.

### Meeting summary

#### Opening remarks – Dr Mary Russell, CEO TEQSA

- Dr Russell outlined how TEQSA's approach to monitoring student protests on campus evolved by building on earlier work of the agency about responding to critical incidents.



- Recognising the need to manage freedom of speech and academic freedom, TEQSA set up a regulatory response group to monitor activities on campus and actively engaged with groups managing protests, Vice-Chancellors and student groups.
- As part of phase 1 of the agency's response to critical incidents, TEQSA issued initial advice and guidance to the sector, identifying ways to strengthen existing practice. This interim guidance will be followed by updated sector guidance, including a statement of regulatory expectations early next year.

## Topic #1 – Managing and responding to protest activities, including outside actors

- Undertake a thorough review of critical incident management (CIM) processes, clearly articulating what situations require calling the CIM team and who makes the call to deploy the CIM team.
- Review policies, procedures and communication strategies, particularly around encampments/occupation and campus access for external actors.
  - Establish expectations and subsequent treatment of three primary stakeholders: students, staff, and external actors. Each may require a different approach.
- Review the process for updating policies to ensure that, when necessary, policies can be updated quickly and efficiently.
- Understand the relationship, expectations and obligations between the institution and the state-based police.
- Understand local, state-based legislation.
- Where possible, carefully plan approved protest activities.
- Maintain high vigilance of monitoring through CCTV – having security guards wear body cams also a helpful practice.

## Topic #2 – Student grievance and complaint processes

- Student complaints must be treated confidentially but an ongoing challenge is external actors pressuring providers to provide information.
  - Managing the increasing number of Freedom of information (FOI) requests regarding complaints creates additional administrative burden.
- Providers need to ensure clarity on the complaints process and improve transparency.
- Principle of proportionality: maintain appropriate documentation and evidence when managing a student grievance issue.
- Providers receive a lot of commentary but few formal complaints. Many complaints have come from external stakeholders.
  - There has been a noticeable increase in staff complaints regarding safety and security.
- The sector is exploring the possibility of a common definition of antisemitism.
- Communicating with students and staff and reaching out to different communities informs providers' approach to student safety and well-being.



- The concept of 'safety' in public versus institutional usage has shifted and is not always aligned.
- Different definitions and terminology used for topics surrounding student safety and gender-based violence such as 'complaints', 'investigations', 'reports' and 'disclosures' presents a challenge to manage public expectations.

### **Topic #3 – Supporting student wellbeing and vulnerable students through contested and personalised issues (academic support)**

- Minimise bureaucracy to enable students to easily access support so they do not need to keep telling their story and justifying themselves.
- Take a proactive approach to informing student groups about how accommodations work and how to access them.

### **Other areas for discussion – Upholding freedom of speech and academic freedom, managing conduct and misconduct, strengthening social cohesion**

- Establish a subgroup of the academic board that investigates and provides advice to the Vice-Chancellor on freedom of speech and academic freedom.
  - Establish a clear delegation of who determines whether an offence has occurred.
- Complex matters need to be taken on a case-by-case basis, however, there needs to be a clear framework for how to approach each case.
- Have a clear strategic plan that is accessible to all stakeholders and includes:
  - The university's intention regarding engaging in political matters
  - Transparency about relationships with other organisations and investments.
- Ensure that all mandatory training for staff and students is considered and effective, rather than a box ticking exercise.
- Uphold freedom of speech and academic freedom but with the view that safety and wellbeing is tantamount.
- Safety is based in state, rather than federal law. Therefore, providers are operating in different contexts. Each provider needs to consider their own operating environment and local jurisdiction and legislation.
- It is important to maintain diversity and context, therefore it is not always appropriate to adopt single or common definitions or language.
- With changes brought about by recommendations of the Australian Universities Accord, the operating environment for universities is becoming more prescriptive.
- Consider the administrative burden that social media has on a provider's response to public issues. Providers are increasingly expected to provide immediate information as well as transparency on decision-making processes, which stretches administrative capacity.



- Student engagement needs to be deliberate and transparent.