

Joint Statement of Principles for the Higher Education Sector COVID-19 Response

5 May 2020

Purpose

This document was created due to the shared concern that a lack of agreed principles to effectively manage the higher-education sector's response to the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic may have a profound effect on the well-being of a fair, equitable and prosperous Australia.

The following agreed Principles seek to ensure that the higher education sector is able to meet community expectations for public health and safety. We are also mindful of managing the post-COVID-19 pandemic situation while not losing the learnings from the many innovative approaches taken and effectively benefitting from the rich substrate of experiences gained during the pandemic.

The Australian Council of Professions (ACoP), Universities Australia (UA), the Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia (ITECA), the Australian Collaborative Education Network (ACEN) and the Independent Higher Education Australia (IHEA), and the members of each of these organisations, place a high priority on supporting governments and individuals in Australia as they strive to manage the impact of the pandemic, while ensuring the quality and employability of the COVID-19-affected cohort of graduates. We are engaging directly with the Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) and the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) to achieve this goal. TEQSA supports the creation of a joint statement of principles to guide professional accreditation during the COVID-19 pandemic, and will have reference to the statement in TEQSA's own course accreditation activities.

These agreed Principles provide guidance for the higher education sector to mitigate and minimise the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on

- students who began their journey to professional employment in different conditions,
- higher education providers who are working in difficult circumstances,
- professional accrediting bodies who assess graduate outcomes to meet professional requirements and international benchmarks,
- employers and other stakeholders who rely on the integrity of educational assessments and qualifications, and
- the community at large, which expects and needs a reliable supply of qualified, capable, proficient and certified professionals.

We agree to work in partnership with each other and with government to adapt higher education courses and registration/accreditation to mitigate and minimise the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic while upholding the continuity, integrity and reputation of Australian higher education and recognising its indispensable contribution to Australia's well-being and prosperity.

Scope

This *Joint Statement* outlines consensus-based principles for the higher education sector adapting during the COVID-19 pandemic in the following areas:

- 1. Accreditation Flexibility and maintaining Course Quality**
- 2. Maintaining Quality during changed Teaching and Learning**
- 3. Supporting Online Assessments while maintaining Rigour**
- 4. Mitigating a reduced availability of Professional Placements**
- 5. Flexibility on (Re-)Registration/Accreditation of Professionals**
- 6. Maintaining International Accords for Professionals' Mobility**

1. Accreditation Flexibility and maintaining Course Quality

The Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA), professional accreditation bodies and higher education providers all play roles in assuring quality educational outcomes. During the COVID-19 pandemic, their ability to conduct their usual activities may be constrained but their quality assurance role continues to be vital. Professional accreditation bodies recognise that during the current pandemic education providers must attend to educational delivery and student needs first and flexibility should be exercised in the timing and means of accreditation reviews and compliance reporting.

Principles:

- a. Professional accreditation bodies recognise that during the current pandemic higher education providers must attend to educational delivery and student needs first.***
- b. Professional accreditation bodies will exercise flexibility to allow higher education providers to direct their efforts to immediate educational priorities, and modify processes and requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic, including extensions and retrospective reviews where appropriate.***
- c. Roles and responsibilities in accrediting, monitoring and educational quality assurance remain, and professional accreditation bodies reflect elevated quality and compliance risks in outcomes and actions.***
- d. Professional accreditation bodies maintain stakeholder transparency, documenting adjustments and adaptations to accreditation processes and requirements made during the COVID-19 pandemic.***
- e. Regulators provide formal guidelines and binding statements of action/non-action regarding expiring higher-education course and/or provider accreditations.***
- f. Governments provide legislative and/or regulatory support for regulators and professional registration bodies enacting the above.***

2. Maintaining Quality during changed Teaching and Learning

During the COVID-19 pandemic higher education providers are having to rapidly change teaching and learning delivery, potentially creating risks to the quality of teaching and students developing critical knowledge, skills, application ability, etc.

Principles:

- a. Higher education providers maintain the learning outcomes required by professional accreditation bodies.***
- b. Higher education providers remain responsible for ensuring that students continue to be able to develop requisite knowledge, skills, application ability, etc., that resources are allocated accordingly and that study periods are extended where necessary.***
- c. When higher education providers change teaching, learning and student support, they keep abreast of teaching innovations and incorporate best practices and maintain standards.***
- d. Course design reviews and quality assurance will continue.***
- e. Higher education providers keep records of program adjustments and departures from accredited program design, and the rationale for program and subject modification decisions.***
- f. Higher education providers review and evaluate the effectiveness of necessary adjustments and implement any necessary remediation or scaffolding as students progress into subsequent teaching periods.***

3. Supporting Online Assessments while maintaining Rigour

During the COVID-19 pandemic higher education providers are having to rapidly change assessments, potentially creating risks to assessment reliability, with the heightened risk of contract cheating, plagiarism and compromised standard controls. In many cases, new and/or flexible methods of demonstrating the required learning outcomes, knowledge and skills are needed and will be adopted.

Principles:

- a. When adapting assessments, higher education providers keep abreast of options and innovations, and incorporate best practices and maintain assessment integrity.***
- b. The awarding of qualifications reflect agreed outcomes and/or standards, recognising the need for greater flexibility in how these outcomes are demonstrated.***
- c. Professional accreditation bodies take a pragmatic and realistic approach to evaluating learning outcomes.***
- d. Higher education providers keep records of material change in assessment methods and the rationale for such change, along with samples of assessments.***

- e. Higher education providers review and evaluate the effectiveness of changes and identify, where necessary, additional learning opportunities to support successful student progression.***

4. Mitigating a reduced availability of Professional Placements

Work Integrated Learning (WIL)¹, including professional placements, internships, industry projects and/or industry linkage programs are an essential element of many higher education programs to prepare graduates as future professionals and enhance their employability. In many courses, the participation in these is a prerequisite for student progression and graduation. The higher education sector in partnership with the peak bodies supporting this Joint Statement has undertaken much work in this in recent years; however, these efforts have been severely disrupted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Principles:

- a. Higher education providers, in partnership with the industry sector, remain responsible for ensuring that graduates develop required practical, professional, occupational and workplace skills, and work with the industry sector to develop new strategies and methods as needed.***
- b. Higher education providers should keep abreast of professional practice and skill development options and innovations to adopt best practices or effective alternatives.***
- c. Professional accreditation bodies take a pragmatic, flexible and realistic approach to placements during the pandemic, while upholding the objectives of their WIL requirements.***
- d. Professional associations, in partnership with the industry and higher education sectors help facilitate new solutions to professional placements where appropriate.***
- e. Higher education providers keep records of professional practice skills development initiatives adopted during the pandemic and evaluate outcomes before awarding associated qualifications.***
- f. The higher education sector recognises that notwithstanding the current pandemic measures, there are likely to be pipeline effects over several years that need to be collaboratively mitigated.***

5. Flexibility on (Re-)Registration/Accreditation of Professionals

A range of regulatory authorities, professional associations and/or professional accreditation bodies assess and/or examine individuals for entry to practice. During this pandemic, the (re-)registration/accreditation of professionals may be constrained. Current examples are healthcare practitioners and other first responders.

¹ <http://cdn1.acen.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/National-WIL-Strategy-in-university-education-032015.pdf>

Principles:

- a. Regulatory authorities, professional associations and/or professional accreditation bodies adjust processes and requirements to realistically and pragmatically accommodate the current pandemic-related disruptions.***
- b. Regulatory authorities, professional associations and/or professional accreditation bodies realistically and pragmatically assess and recognise qualifications and give reasonable consideration to the actions of higher education providers during the current pandemic.***
- c. Regulatory authorities and professional associations and/or professional accreditation bodies maintain transparency, documenting to stakeholders adaptations to processes and requirements made during the current pandemic.***

6. Maintaining International Accords for Professionals' Mobility

Some regulatory authorities and professional accreditation bodies are signatories to international accords and agreements that enable reciprocal international recognition of Australian qualifications and professional registrations or certifications. It is recognised that during the COVID-19 pandemic there may be risks to the continued compliance with the terms of these accords and agreements. It is important that the future international mobility of professionals is protected. This is relevant to both Australian graduates' ability to work overseas as well as to maintaining Australia's reputation and attractiveness as a study destination for international students.

Principles:

- a. Signatories to international accords and agreements engage with their relevant international counterparts to minimise any risks to these accords and agreements due to the current COVID-19 pandemic.***
- b. Signatories to international accords and agreements maintain transparency, documenting to stakeholders adaptations to processes and requirements made during the current pandemic.***

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