Australian Government

Australian Research Council

ARC Submission to TEQSA Act Legislative Framework Review

Modernising and Strengthening TEQSA's Powers – An Australian Research Council (ARC) Perspective

October 2025

Prepared by: Australian Research Council

ARC Submission to TEQSA Act Legislative Framework Review

Introduction

The Australian Research Council (ARC) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing conversation on strengthening governance and modernising regulation of Australian universities. The Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) plays a pivotal role in maintaining the integrity, quality, and international standing of Australia's higher education system. The ARC endorses the establishment of mechanisms that empower TEQSA to proactively respond to systemic risks, ensuring that regulatory interventions serve the public interest and provide stewardship of the higher education sector as a vital national asset.

The ARC notes that the scope outlined in TEQSA's consultation paper focuses primarily on the teaching and learning role of universities, and as universities as an employer of teaching staff. However, a core function of universities, as recognised in the *Higher Education Standards Framework 2021* (Threshold Standards), is research and research training. The governance and culture of research within universities has a direct impact on both the student experience and the standing of the Australian higher education sector. A significant number of university employees undertake research and supervise research students. Strong research performance not only enhances institutional reputation but also attracts high-calibre students and enables reinvestment in teaching and learning infrastructure.

The ARC recommends that any changes to TEQSA's powers and functions should holistically reflect the dual teaching and research missions of universities. This approach will ensure a cohesive and robust regulatory framework that upholds governance and standards in line with the expectations of students, staff, and the broader community.

Research Integrity in Australia

Under the Institutional Quality Assurance domain in the Threshold Standards there is a specific section on academic and research integrity. However, TEQSA does not currently play an active role in the oversight of research integrity. The ARC, National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC), and Universities Australia have jointly developed standards of research integrity in Australia through the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2018)* (the Code). Under the Code, which is a principles-based document, universities and research institutions are responsible for managing and promoting research integrity. Limited national oversight is provided through the Australian Research Integrity Committee (ARIC). ARIC was jointly established by the ARC and NHMRC in 2011 and its purpose is to review institutional processes used to manage and investigate potential breaches of the Code. Although it can make recommendations, ARIC has no enforceable powers.

The current research integrity framework places trust in universities and institutions to regulate themselves. As a consequence of the devolved nature of this system, there is inbuilt fragmentation and a lack of transparency, including a lack of national level data. In recent years, these limitations have led to growing concerns among stakeholders that research institutions are not acting in the interests of good practice but rather have perverse incentives to cover up and protect wrongdoing. Critics of the current system point to the research funding incentives where research institutions may be reluctant to investigate concerns about a highly regarded researcher whose work brings in substantial funding. This perspective is reinforced whenever there are media articles that report on serious failures by research institutions (see Liam Mannix's *Cancer research misconduct sparks calls for reform*, Sydney Morning Herald, 27 July 2025).

If stakeholders' trust in the system erodes, this can create a dangerous cycle where individuals no longer raise concerns leading to standards and expectations slipping further. Poor institutional practices in research integrity and a perceived lack of accountability negatively impacts staff and students, particularly PhD students who will become the future Australian research workforce.

The ARC, NHMRC and UA have established a working group to investigate potential solutions for these issues. However, a critical gap remains: the absence of a national regulatory structure capable of providing robust and coordinated oversight and compliance. While the working group will not address this structural need, it is clear that any enduring solution must be anchored in a regulatory framework with both authority and sector-wide reach. Given TEQSA's existing mandate in quality assurance and its established role in safeguarding academic standards, it is appropriately positioned to take a more active role in research integrity.

Research Security

Research security is a collaborative effort between the Australian Government and universities to identify and manage potential risks associated with international research collaboration. While the ARC plays a critical role in safeguarding Australian research and intellectual property from foreign interference, cyber threats, and misuse, the current landscape remains disjointed and effectively self-regulated. Responsibilities for research security are dispersed across institutions, with limited enforcement capability and no centralised regulation. Strengthening consistency and oversight around the management of research security is an increasingly urgent priority for the whole of government.

At present, there is a divergence in perspectives regarding the scale and urgency of the challenge posed by foreign interference. While universities play a vital role in protecting research integrity, reliance on self-regulation alone is insufficient to meet the demands of a rapidly evolving threat landscape. A coordinated national approach would significantly enhance the sector's ability to assess, manage, and mitigate emerging threats. Aligned with TEQSA's intent to address emerging systemic risks and deliver streamlined, coordinated regulation, there is a role in testing and guiding university governance frameworks to ensure that decisions related to research integrity and security are independent of, and not subordinated to, grant-seeking imperatives.

Excellence in Research for Australia

The ARC notes that TEQSA used ARC's Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) as a national benchmark in universities registration. The Threshold Standards require TEQSA to use existing national benchmarking exercises for their research assessment where applicable. ERA was considered the 'national research benchmarking exercise' from 2010 until its discontinuation in 2022. We note that TEQSA Guidance note: *Research requirements for Australian universities*, released post ERA discontinuation, still refers to ERA. In 2024, the *ARC Act 2001 (Cth)* was amended to legislate the evaluation of excellence, depth, and impact of Australian research as ARC functions. The ARC is currently developing policies to meet this legislative requirement. In this context, the ARC would like to note that any reference to ERA, in TEQSA legislative instruments and/or guidelines, should be re-considered. The ARC welcomes the opportunity to continue engaging with TEQSA on how a new research evaluation model could assist TEQSA with its legislative and regulatory requirements.

Conclusion

As the Senate Inquiry into *Quality of governance at Australian higher education providers* has heard, existing governance frameworks are showing signs of strain. Fragmented oversight, weak enforcement mechanisms, and an overreliance on institutional self-regulation have created vulnerabilities in the higher education system that undermine public confidence and expose the sector to unnecessary risks. Australia's research and higher education sectors are national assets. To protect them, governance and regulation must keep pace with growing complexity, emerging threats, and public expectations.

By adopting a holistic approach to regulating both teaching and research, TEQSA would strengthen the integrity, quality, and coherence of Australia's higher education system. This integrated oversight would ensure that academic standards, research practices, and institutional governance foster environments where students benefit from rigorous learning, ethical scholarship, and globally relevant skills. Such stewardship would not only enhance student outcomes but also reinforce public trust in universities as pillars of national progress.