

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a response to the proposed Amendments to the Threshold Standards.

### 1. Demonstrating a Commitment to Addressing Racism

At EQUALS International, diversity is not simply a policy objective but a defining feature of our institutional culture and community. A significant proportion of our students were born outside Australia, bringing a wide range of cultural, linguistic and lived experiences into the learning environment. As a result, our courses place strong emphasis on inclusion, cultural humility and social responsibility. These values are reflected in curriculum design, student support practices and the way we foster respectful and inclusive learning environments. As a provider whose student community is itself disproportionately affected by the issues of racial inclusion and belonging that underpin this consultation, EQUALS is particularly invested in ensuring that reforms are both meaningful and practically effective.

EQUALS notes the significant body of evidence informing this area of the consultation, including the findings of the Racism@Uni Study (February 2026), which drew on responses from more than 76,000 students and staff and concluded that racism is widespread, systemic and persistent across the Australian higher education sector. EQUALS takes these findings seriously. We recognise that racism affects learning environments, wellbeing, participation and trust in institutions — and that the experiences documented in the Study are relevant not only to large universities but to the broader higher education community, including independent providers such as ourselves. This response is offered in that spirit.

#### **Response to Consultation Question 1: What specific actions should providers be required to take?**

EQUALS supports requirements that are institution-wide in scope and that address racism as a systemic risk rather than merely a series of individual incidents. Specific actions we consider appropriate include: requirements that providers maintain clear and accessible complaints pathways specifically addressing racism, obligations to embed anti-racism principles in curriculum design and student induction; requirements that governing bodies receive and respond to regular reporting on the racial safety of the learning environment; and obligations to ensure staff are equipped with the cultural competency to support diverse student cohorts. These expectations should apply across all provider types, calibrated appropriately to institutional size and scale.

### **Response to Consultation Question 2: What targeted guidance would most effectively support providers?**

In considering strengthened expectations around addressing racism in higher education, targeted guidance for providers would be particularly valuable. Effective guidance should prioritise practical implementation rather than prescriptive regulatory requirements. This could include the provision of practical examples of good practice across the sector, templates for complaints reporting and monitoring, and examples of inclusive curriculum design that promote diverse perspectives. Guidance on establishing culturally safe learning environments would also assist institutions in translating broad principles into meaningful institutional practice.

For smaller providers in particular, practical frameworks and examples are far more beneficial than compliance-heavy reporting obligations. Smaller institutions often operate with lean governance and administrative structures, and guidance that supports implementation rather than additional reporting will allow them to focus their efforts on strengthening student experience and learning outcomes.

### **Response to Consultation Question 3: Benefits and limitations of explicit anti-racism standards**

The introduction of explicit anti-racism standards may offer several benefits. Clearer expectations across the sector can strengthen student safety and trust, reinforce institutional accountability, and assist TEQSA in monitoring compliance in a more consistent manner. At the same time, there are potential limitations that should be considered. There is a risk that additional standards may duplicate existing anti-discrimination legislation and regulatory obligations already in place. There is also a risk that overly prescriptive requirements could lead institutions to focus on procedural compliance rather than fostering genuine cultural change.

For these reasons, EQUALS considers that a principles-based approach embedded across the existing Threshold Standards is preferable to the creation of a single standalone standard, while acknowledging that either approach would represent an improvement on the current framework. Integrating expectations relating to inclusion, cultural safety and institutional accountability across governance, student wellbeing and learning environment standards would strengthen the framework while maintaining the flexibility necessary for diverse providers to implement these commitments in ways that are meaningful within their own institutional contexts.

### 2. Incorporating Governance Principles and Transparency Requirements

EQUALS notes that this area of the consultation is primarily directed at public universities, and that the proposed Part C of the Threshold Standards is intended to apply specifically to Table A universities under the Higher Education Support Act 2003. EQUALS, as an independent provider, would not fall within the scope of the proposed Part C. Our comments below are offered in that context, focusing on the design of the proposed changes rather than their direct application to EQUALS.

The higher education sector in Australia is characterised by a diversity of institutional models, governance structures and operating environments. Public universities typically operate within large, complex governance frameworks established through specific legislation and supported by significant public funding. Their scale, public accountability and statutory governance arrangements mean that additional transparency and reporting requirements are often appropriate and aligned with community expectations.

By contrast, independent providers and smaller institutes of higher education operate under different governance structures, often with smaller governing bodies, leaner administrative systems and more focused course offerings. These institutions remain fully accountable under the TEQSA regulatory framework and the Higher Education Standards Framework, but their organisational scale and governance models differ significantly from those of large public universities.

#### **Response to Consultation Question 1: Advantages and risks of a differentiated Part C**

EQUALS supports the creation of a Part C that applies specifically to public universities. The principal advantages of this approach are that it allows stronger, more enforceable governance expectations to be applied to the institutions with the highest levels of public funding and community accountability, while preserving regulatory proportionality for the diverse range of other registered providers. A differentiated structure also allows the Threshold Standards to incorporate the University Governance Principles; which were explicitly designed for public universities not subject to board or shareholder oversight; without extending requirements that may be inappropriate or operationally burdensome for smaller providers. At the same time, EQUALS notes that clear definitional boundaries will be important. The term 'public university' should be precisely defined in the amended Standards, and TEQSA should provide guidance to assist providers in understanding which obligations apply to them. There is a risk that ambiguity in the scope of Part C could create uncertainty for providers near the boundary of the defined

category, or that it could be perceived as creating a two-tiered regulatory system with different levels of accountability.

### **Response to Consultation Question 2: Academic oversight, staffing and teaching quality**

Strengthened standards on academic oversight, staffing profiles and teaching quality have the potential to improve student outcomes, provided they are implemented in a way that reflects the genuine diversity of provider models in the sector. Requirements that academic boards conduct annual reviews and that each course has sufficient staffing and academic oversight are appropriate in principle. However, the practical application of 'staffing profile' requirements should accommodate the different delivery models used by smaller registered providers; including the use of sessional and industry practitioners; which can enhance rather than diminish learning quality in vocationally-focused courses.

Recognising this distinction within the Threshold Standards is important to ensure that regulation remains proportionate and fit for purpose across the diverse higher education landscape. Applying identical transparency and reporting requirements designed for large public universities to smaller providers risks imposing disproportionate administrative and compliance burdens, potentially diverting resources away from core educational activities such as teaching quality, student support and curriculum innovation.

A differentiated approach allows the regulatory framework to maintain strong governance expectations while recognising the structural realities of different provider types. In doing so, it supports regulatory proportionality, ensures that compliance requirements remain manageable for smaller providers, and allows institutions to focus their resources on delivering high-quality educational outcomes for students.

### **3. Response to Supporting People with Disability in Higher Education**

EQUALS supports the proposed amendments to strengthen the inclusion of students and staff with disability within the Threshold Standards. People with disability are the fastest-growing priority student cohort in Australian higher education, and the current Standards do not adequately reflect contemporary expectations around inclusive practice.

EQUALS particularly supports the proposed embedding of universal design principles across learning and institutional environments. Universal design for learning is consistent with our existing commitment to inclusive curriculum and assessment practice, and its inclusion in the Threshold Standards would provide a useful framework for providers to evaluate and improve their practice. We also support the modernisation of terminology to reflect contemporary

understandings of disability, and the clarification of expectations around inherent requirements; which, if well-designed, can help providers make more transparent and equitable decisions about course access.

As with other areas of the consultation, EQUALS would encourage TEQSA to develop practical guidance to support smaller providers in implementing these expectations. Guidance on how to apply universal design principles in different delivery contexts, including online and blended delivery, would be particularly valuable for the range of providers operating across the sector.

### 4. Responding to Emerging Technologies in the Threshold Standards *End of document.*

#### **Response to Consultation Question 1: Does 'emerging technologies' adequately capture the relevant innovations?**

While the term emerging technologies is generally appropriate, consideration could be given to terminology such as 'emerging digital and AI-enabled technologies' or 'advanced digital and AI technologies', which more clearly reflects the current drivers of change in higher education. This would acknowledge developments such as generative artificial intelligence, learning analytics, automation tools, adaptive learning platforms, and advanced data systems that are already influencing educational practice.

Terminology should remain sufficiently flexible so that the regulatory framework can accommodate future technological developments without requiring frequent revision of the standards.

#### **Response to Consultation Question 2: Do current standards provide adequate guidance on emerging technology risks?**

EQUALS's view is that the current Threshold Standards do not provide adequate guidance in this area. Generative AI in particular is already reshaping assessment practice, raising significant concerns about academic integrity that institutions are navigating with limited regulatory direction. Similarly, questions of equitable access to AI tools; including access for students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or with lower digital literacy; are not currently addressed in the Standards. EQUALS would welcome explicit standards that require providers to assess and respond to these equity risks as part of their governance arrangements.

### **Response to Consultation Question 3: Balancing risk management with provider flexibility**

Importantly, the Threshold Standards should continue to adopt a principles-based approach rather than prescriptive requirements regarding specific technologies. This is particularly important given the pace at which technological capabilities are evolving.

Standards should focus on ensuring that providers demonstrate appropriate governance, oversight and risk management arrangements for technologies that influence teaching, learning, research and institutional operations. This could include expectations that governing bodies incorporate technology-related risks into institutional risk frameworks and that academic governance bodies oversee the impact of emerging technologies on learning outcomes, assessment integrity and academic standards.

At the same time, providers should retain flexibility to determine how technologies are adopted and integrated within their own institutional contexts. A balanced approach that emphasises responsible governance, ethical use and protection of academic integrity, while avoiding overly prescriptive rules, will allow institutions to innovate and harness the benefits of new technologies while safeguarding the quality and reputation of Australian higher education. EQUALS also draws attention to the importance of data governance and student privacy as a key risk area in this context. Providers using learning analytics, AI-assisted assessment tools or adaptive learning platforms should be expected to demonstrate that student data is managed in accordance with privacy obligations and institutional ethical standards. The Threshold Standards could usefully address this expectation explicitly.

## **5. Approach to a Cyclical Review of the Threshold Standards**

EQUALS supports the proposed introduction of not less than a five-yearly cyclical review of the Threshold Standards. A structured review process provides welcome certainty for the sector while ensuring that the Standards remain contemporary and fit for purpose as the higher education landscape evolves.

EQUALS encourages the design of a review methodology that is transparent, evidence-informed and inclusive of diverse stakeholder perspectives; including those of smaller and independent registered providers, who may otherwise be underrepresented in sector-wide consultation processes. Structured engagement mechanisms, such as targeted consultation with provider groups of different sizes and models, would help ensure that the review captures a genuinely representative range of views. EQUALS would welcome the opportunity to contribute to future review processes.

*End of submission.*