



Consultation paper

Interim guidance: Managing external actors

Why we're seeking your feedback

Protests at universities in 2024 drew attention to the issue of external actors, who had no connection to university communities, being active on university campuses to promote their own agendas.

Students and staff reported concerns that these individuals and groups were engaged in behaviours that put the safety and wellbeing of students and staff at risk.

In response to these concerns, a number of universities began reviewing policies and procedures to address this issue.

The diversity of the higher education sector, including the laws, by-laws and statutes with which different providers must maintain compliance, made it difficult to establish a sector-wide approach.

During roundtable meetings and other discussions, TEQSA gathered information about emerging practice in response to this issue.

Recognising that responses were uneven across the sector, TEQSA has developed interim guidance to assist providers in addressing the risks posed by external actors, and is seeking feedback on this draft guidance.

How to provide feedback

This consultation opened on Thursday 6 March 2025 and closes at 5:00pm (AEDT) on Thursday 27 March 2025.

You can submit feedback to consultation@teqsa.gov.au. Submissions in Microsoft Word or .PDF format are preferred.

Questions about this consultation

If you have any questions about this consultation, please email socialcohesion@teqsa.gov.au.

After feedback closes

TEQSA will consider all feedback and will aim to publish the final guidance materials in April 2025.



Interim guidance: Managing external actors

This interim guidance provides initial advice to the higher education sector on challenges to be aware of and emerging practice related to managing external actors on campus.

Context

In 2024, multiple Australian universities experienced protests and encampments on campus related to conflict in the Middle East. Similar protests occurred on campuses in other countries, including Canada, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and the United States. External actors or 'outside agitators' have been identified as a challenge that institutions need to manage.

In the Australian context, it has been widely acknowledged that external actors have participated in protests and encampments on university campuses. Many of the more serious incidents that occurred during the protests and encampments involved external actors. Some of these challenges have been publicly documented, for example by the University of Sydney and the University of Melbourne.¹ Similarly overseas, analysis by the New York Police Department estimated that almost 50% of people arrested over incidents at Columbia University and the City College of New York in late April 2024 were not affiliated with either school.

This interim guidance is informed by learnings from a [series of social cohesion roundtables](#) that TEQSA organised and hosted in late 2024. At these roundtables, senior university representatives and other stakeholders shared their experiences of protests and encampments on campuses in Australia and the challenges associated with these events, including identifying and managing external actors. The guidance is also informed by relevant submissions to recent parliamentary inquiries.²

TEQSA's intent is to share emerging practice across the sector and identify some issues that may warrant consideration from providers, depending on their individual circumstances. As such, this interim guidance is intended to offer broad advice to the sector.

TEQSA also encourages providers to consider other relevant recommendations from forthcoming reviews, including internal reviews by individual institutions, the Australian Human Rights Commission's study into the prevalence and impact of racism in Australian universities and work by the special envoys to combat antisemitism and Islamophobia.

Obligations under the Threshold Standards

The [Higher Education Standards Framework \(Threshold Standards\) 2021](#) (Threshold Standards) set clear expectations for providers to identify and manage risks to student and staff wellbeing and safety, including those associated with external actors on campus.

TEQSA draws attention to the following parts of the Threshold Standards as among those which are relevant to managing external actors:

¹ See Hodgkinson, B (2024) [University of Sydney External Review Report](#), University of Sydney, accessed 15 January 2025; Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights (2024) 'Proof Committee Hansard - Antisemitism at Australian universities', December 12 2024, 4-14, [Human Rights Joint Committee 2024 12 12.pdf;fileType=application/pdf](#).

² See [Commission of Inquiry into Antisemitism at Australian Universities Bill 2024 \(No. 2\) – Parliament of Australia](#); [Antisemitism at Australian universities](#) **OFFICIAL** [Parliament of Australia](#).



- Section 2.3 encompasses organisational responsibilities for safeguarding and supporting the wellbeing and safety of students and staff.
- Standard 6.1.3b sets expectations for having established clearly defined roles and delegated authority for effective governance and policy development and review, including relevant codes, by-laws, statutes and rules.
- Standard 6.1.4 requires the governing body to maintain an institutional environment where the wellbeing of students and staff is fostered, and freedom of speech and academic freedom are upheld and protected.
- Section 6.2 requires that providers be able to demonstrate, and the corporate governing body assure itself, that the provider is operating effectively and sustainably. This includes:
 - complying with all relevant legislative requirements
 - identifying, managing and mitigating material risks to higher education operations, and
 - monitoring and taking action in response to formal complaints, allegations of misconduct and critical incidents.

Sector challenges

Challenges that providers identified in relation to managing external actors on campus include:

- Balancing their obligation to uphold freedom of speech and academic freedom with their obligation to protect the health and safety of students and staff, including minimising risks of psychological or physical harm that may come from external actors.
- Understanding and navigating legal provisions for dealing with the occupation of, and encampments on, an institution's grounds by external actors and disbanding protests that escalate and become unsafe.
- Understanding and fostering productive relationships with state-based police.
 - There may be variation across jurisdictions in relation to legislation that must be considered and the drafting of relevant provisions.
- The diversity of the higher education sector made it difficult for providers to draw on one another's experience and expertise.
 - Factors such as the geographical location and structure of a provider's campus (or campuses) may require different policies and procedures or by-laws to manage external actors.
 - For example, different strategies may need to be employed to manage external actors at:
 - » institutions with one versus multiple campuses
 - » campuses located in major metropolitan hubs and easily accessible by public transport compared to those that are more isolated
 - » campuses with lots of open space versus primarily enclosed buildings
 - » self-contained campuses with external barriers compared with those which are porous to local foot traffic in a busy local area.



Emerging practice to manage external actors

Australian universities that experienced protests and encampments on campus in 2024 demonstrated different ways of managing external actors, and various learnings have subsequently been identified.

Providers' options for managing external actors may be influenced by provisions within institutional instruments such as University Acts, by-laws, statutes, rules, enterprise bargaining agreements, and codes of conduct for staff and students. It is important that these instruments be properly understood.

To the extent that legal obligations and institutional instruments permit, the below strategies identified from emerging practice within the sector may warrant consideration from providers to assist with managing external actors on campus. In some cases, universities may need to seek amendments to statutes or by-laws to ensure appropriate responses can be implemented to manage external actors on campus.

Institutional policies and misconduct procedures

- Regularly review and update policies and processes to ensure their ongoing effectiveness. Address any identified gaps in existing policies promptly.
 - Review the process for updating policies to ensure that, when necessary, policies can be updated quickly and efficiently.
- Establish clear reporting procedures for incidents or the presence of external actors on campus.
 - Reporting processes are user-friendly, easy to access, include provision for confidentiality or anonymity and be clearly communicated to staff and students
 - Ensure there is clarity about how the provider will respond to these reports, and within what timeframe.
- Develop a risk assessment framework for external actors.
 - Clarify how relevant legal and policy frameworks affects the capacity for external actors to plan and/or participate in protests or encampments on campus, and the terms on which they may do so.
- Establish or clearly communicate policies or by-laws that articulate campus access for external actors and procedures for responding to situations where external actors breach these policies.
 - Set out what actions will be taken and consequences that apply to external actors who engage in behaviour that is disruptive, damaging, a threat to the safety or wellbeing of others, or otherwise breaches institutional policies.
 - » Regularly review whether these procedures are being upheld and the misconduct process implemented in a timely manner.
- Ensure policies and by-laws are well advertised, and easy to access and understand, including for people outside the institution.

Critical incident management

- Review and update existing critical incident management structures and institutional security arrangements with a consideration of this guidance and learnings from recent events.



- Ensure clarity exists on what situations warrant calling the critical incident management team and/or the local police, and who is responsible for making that decision.
- Develop productive relationships with outside agencies, such as state police or Australian Federal Police.
 - Understand what obligations and expectations police have about when they should be called and how they can assist.
- Establish a standardised process and communication strategy for use by campus security regarding external actors coming on to campus.
- Establish clear organisational responsibility for developing, implementing and monitoring safety plans, for individual staff or students who may be targeted by outside actors.

Education and training for staff and students

- Provide clear and practical education and training on relevant institutional policies and misconduct procedures for all students, staff and contractors.
 - Training includes processes for how to report incidents or the presence of external actors on campus.
- Equip staff with a clear understanding of critical management procedures so they are confident following appropriate processes when responding to incidents involving external actors on campus.
- Establish protocols for supporting staff to deal with external actors who may enter learning and teaching spaces, or offices.

Legal obligations

- Confirm the governing body has documented and possesses a clear understanding of the legal status of the institution with regards to the classification of land/property in relation to protests and outside actors.
 - This includes obligations under relevant state or territory legislation, any applicable local by-laws, and legislation under which the institution is established.
- Ensure relevant staff understand what powers the institution has and the legal avenues available for managing external actors.
 - This includes taking action against or removing people that are not part of the provider's community who are engaging in behaviour that poses a risk to the wellbeing and safety of students and staff.

Campus management

- A statement should be displayed at entrances to campus for external actors and campus visitors that outlines conditions associated with access to campus.
- Manage building access, through access cards or other mechanisms where appropriate.
- Examine how student and staff identification cards could be used to enable identification of external actors.
 - This includes establishing an expectation that staff and students carry their identification with them and show it to security when requested.



- Reflect on the necessity and effectiveness of monitoring through CCTV and security guards wearing body cams.
 - Ensure relevant privacy laws and obligations are considered, and that there are appropriate policies in place around the use, storage and access of data captured.

TEQSA encourages all higher education providers to consider this emerging practice, giving appropriate consideration to all risks relevant to the institution's particular circumstances and ensuring steps are taken to protect student and staff wellbeing and safety. Appropriate changes are to be implemented to ensure risks to the wellbeing and safety of students and staff are managed in a timely and proportionate way.