

Response to Learning and Teaching Performance Fund Issues Paper

The Innovative Research Universities Australia (IRU Australia) strongly supports dedicated funding for demonstrated quality in learning and teaching as part of the *Backing Australia's Future* package. The six member universities of the IRU Australia have all put equal emphasis on teaching and on research since they were established in the 1960s. They all stress the importance of a strongly student-focussed learning environment, with schemes to promote access, equity, and diversity, and place emphasis on multiple modes of delivery, integrating new educational technologies into high quality face-to-face teaching. They have all given strategic priority to quality and innovation in course design, development and delivery.

The IRU Australia contends that learning and teaching excellence is widespread across the universities but is manifested in different ways, reflecting the diversity of the contemporary Australian higher education sector. The Group therefore supports the need for a model that recognises the diversity of institutions and teaching and learning environments, and the complexity of defining and measuring learning and teaching excellence. To do justice to this, a satisfactory model must identify different aspects of learning and teaching performance and utilise a range of indicators, both quantitative and qualitative. The IRU Australia also supports measures that will place an equal value on the overall quality of the student learning experience as well as practical outcomes.

Comments on specific questions raised within the Issues Paper are provided, and the Group welcomes the opportunity for more detailed input during the consultation sessions to be conducted in June and July.

Response to Specific Questions

1. Which model do you believe is the most appropriate for use in the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund?

The IRU Australia considers that the AVCC approach offers the most potential for development as a model that would meet the requirements of making assessments of institutions in a diverse and complex system. The AVCC model is the Group's preferred choice as it attempts to measure not only the inputs and outputs, but also the quality of the learning experience in between. It also recognises that quantitative measures alone focus unduly on the role of education as an instrument rather than an experience. High quality learning and teaching however focuses both on scholarly interaction as well as practical outcomes and any scheme rewarding excellence should recognise this.

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The Composite model takes a simpler approach and is more streamlined than the AVCC model but would need substantial development to meet requirements for a sufficiently sophisticated methodology to satisfy the sector. The model falls short in that it does not account sufficiently for the diversity of the system by not allowing sufficiently for qualitative assessments to be made. The IRU Australia opposes the use of rankings proposed within the Composite model on the basis that there are variations in the dimensions of excellence, the importance of which is reduced through simplistic use of rankings. The Composite model as proposed also fails to measure several of important inputs such as quality of the teachers and of the student support and learning environments.

The External Peer Review model, such as that used between 1993 and 1995 under the Government's Quality Assurance Program is the most time intensive and suffers from the lack of transparency. It may well be desirable to include some element of peer review in whatever model is adopted so that an assessment can be made of qualitative as well as quantitative aspects of learning and teaching.

The Outcomes Based Model, while appropriate for measuring areas such research performance, where it is acknowledged that output measures are a reliable proxy for actual performance, is not as relevant for assessing excellence in learning and teaching where both inputs and outputs are not necessarily correlated and where results can depend largely on an institution's location and prestige. All of the performance indicators suggested in this model are appropriate in their own right, but collectively provide a one-sided impression.

2. **Are there models not discussed in the issues paper which you would like to propose?**

The IRU Australia, while supporting the AVCC model, suggests that there is scope for inclusion of some Composite model characteristics using the AVCC dimensions.

3. **What are your views on the model proposed by the AVCC Working Party?**

The IRU Australia members support the proposed AVCC model both in terms of the underlying principles and the dimensions proposed for the learning and teaching portfolio. The use of both qualitative and quantitative evidence against each dimension is supported as is the recommendation that funding be allocated for each dimension and weighted by funded student load.

The Group agrees with concerns regarding the workload implications of the portfolio approach but recognises that a fair allocation of funds requires the presentation of a case based on institutional profile and mission plus evidence and careful independent evaluation of that case. The Group recommends that attention be given to the form and content of the portfolios. The portfolio provides DEST with an opportunity to use group indicators (e.g. IRU Australia, ATN etc.) constructively as a means of comparing like with like particularly when evaluating teaching and learning objectives with each institution's strategic plan. State indicators might be more relevant, for instance, in assessing graduate outcomes such as employment rates and salaries. National indicators can be used to compare indicators in categories such as student satisfaction (by discipline), teaching resources, support services and other areas that are not as dependent on group or state factors.

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- 4. If you support an approach which includes performance indicators, what are your views on the indicators canvassed in the issues paper? Are there particular indicators you would like to see included or excluded in measuring excellence under the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund? Why?**

The use of performance indicators in the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund introduces objectivity and transparency. The indicators canvassed in the Issues Paper are a good start but are weighted too heavily toward student indicators which, while necessary are not sufficient for a fair and full assessment of learning and teaching excellence. The approach taken the AVCC better addresses this issue by proposing several dimensions against which performance can be judged and by proposing both input and process indicators such as quality of courses, quality of teachers, and the learning environment.

The AVCC paper admittedly does not provide performance indicators for each of their dimensions however these could be discussed further during the consultation process. The IRU Australia would support additional indicators that recognise the teaching-research nexus. These could include the percentage of teaching staff who are actively involved in research and the ability of institutions and staff to incorporate cutting-edge research into continuous course revisions. The suggestion that the AVCC performance indicators, resulting from the 2003 survey, be used to facilitate benchmarking with similar universities is a good one. Clearly this is a contentious area but the five dimensions provided within the AVCC Working Party paper serve as a useful starting point for further development of the performance indicators.

- 5. If you support an approach which includes performance indicators, which would offer a more valid measure of excellence in learning and teaching – a single performance indicator or triangulation of data using a small set of indicators?**

The IRU Australia supports the use of multiple performance indicators placed appropriately within the dimensions proposed by the AVCC Working Group. It is unlikely that the triangulation of data suggested will produce a valid measure of excellence in teaching and learning.

- 6. If you support an approach which includes performance indicators, should crude results for each institution be adjusted for the impact of student and course mix, or compared within groupings of like institutions?**

The IRU Australia recommends that appropriate adjustments be made on the basis of student and course mix (e.g. external vs internal studies, discipline mixes). Comparison with 'like institutions' is not recommended for all measures of performance due to variations within groups (refer answer to question 10). The major adjustment that should occur would be for weighting by institution to account for funded student load for the purpose of allocating funding.

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- 7. If you support a peer review model, what are your views on the suggestion that such a model should focus on a specific theme, selected by DEST annually? What are your views on the possible themes suggested in the paper?**

The introduction of new themes each year would result in a shifting of the goalposts therefore making it difficult for institutions to become familiar with the Fund's requirements, reducing the ability of institutions to plan strategically. For instance most institutions will want to devise internal reward structures and policies around the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund and need some stability in order to achieve this. For the Fund to have the greatest impact, it should aim to identify, reward and develop the areas that are central to teaching and learning excellence across the system rather than take a piecemeal approach that is unlikely to result in long-term benefits. One way of reducing workload might be to have an overall list of agreed themes or dimensions that is in place for a period of some years, but to take a subset as the focus in any particular year.

- 8. How should institutions' performance be compared – by benchmarking, ranking or on the basis of improvement over time?**

The IRU Australia favours the establishment of a scheme which establishes clear benchmarks where there are known criteria. As the AVCC Working Party submission points out this allows for the fact that many universities may be at similar levels of excellence, a fact that ranking tends to obscure.

The Group recommends against the adoption of a ranking scheme for the simple reason that these focus on comparative assessment and result in outcomes that are likely to be misinterpreted and misused. Ranking schemes have proven to be divisive in the past and are not appropriate in an exercise such as this where both quantitative and qualitative indicators are needed to arrive at a complete picture.

- 9. Should performance be compared on a whole-of-institution basis, on a Field of Education basis or on some other basis?**

The IRU Australia favours a model that recognises diversity between and within universities. Whatever the methodology that is adopted, it must have the capacity to address this. If this is not done by distinguishing between various dimensions of learning and teaching (as proposed by the AVCC), then field of education may be an alternative. The Group would argue that funding should be distributed on a whole of institution basis and that individual institutions be given the discretion to allocate the funds as they see fit.

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10. If within groupings of like institutions, what should those groupings be?

The Group cautions against the use of group comparisons on any widespread basis, done so on the mistaken belief that common foundations and philosophies result in homogeneous groupings that exhibit similar characteristics across most measures suitable for benchmarking. Each institution within any of the groups has its own distinctive academic profile, its own processes and its own strategies for achieving learning and teaching excellences. The Group strongly cautions against any connection being made between group comparisons and funding allocations. The comparisons will inform the process adding to the range of valuable data that will emerge, but the role of groups for more than differentiation and positioning needs to be clearly understood before extended use is made of data from group comparisons.

While it is quite likely that these groups, as a whole, will exhibit distinctive characteristics, it is also likely that there will be significant variation between institutions within each group on any given measure. This was one of the major findings of the recent *Patterns of Higher Education Institutions in the UK* report published by Universities UK in September 2003. That report established that the self-chosen groups (e.g. Russell Group, 1994 Group, Coalition of Modern Universities and the Non-aligned Group) displayed distinctive characteristics in areas such as student characteristics and outcomes but that there were significant variations occurring across each group on almost every measure. So while the groups are useful in terms of positioning institutions in the eyes of the stakeholders, particularly in terms of the overall experience that students can expect, they do not necessarily provide sufficient commonality required for them to be considered as the best means of comparing institutions on every dimension, particularly for the purposes of funding.

**Innovative Research Universities Australia
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