

LEARNING AND TEACHING PERFORMANCE FUND
Response to the Discussion Paper – Submission Cover Page

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Is the submission made on behalf of an organisation? (Y/N)	Y
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Does the organisation consent to being identified in any possible reports on the outcomes of this submission process, noting that the report could be published on the DEST website? (Y/N)	Y
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Response to DEST Discussion Paper

Learning and Teaching Performance Fund: Future Directions

Introduction

The Innovative Research Universities Australia (IRU Australia) strongly supports dedicated funding for demonstrated quality in learning and teaching. The six member universities of the Group have all put equal emphasis on teaching and on research since they were established in the 1960s. 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. Internationalisation pervades the approach to 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 supports the continued need for a Learning and Teaching Performance Fund allocation 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 that will place an equal value on the overall quality of the student learning experience as well as practical outcomes.

The member universities of IRU Australia have provided individual responses to the discussion paper and therefore this response is limited to several issues of overall concern to the Group. The IRU Australia welcomes the opportunity for more detailed input during the consultation sessions to be conducted in March and April.

Refining, but not reinventing, the current methodology

The Discussion Paper points out that the introduction of the Fund has been successful in directing the attention of institutions to the quality of learning and teaching. The IRU Australia shares the commitment of the Department to build on experiences of this year and to improve the process for future years.

Despite the criticisms levelled at the current framework for assessing strategies, assembling data, reporting of results, and the funding of outcomes the IRU Australia recommends that given the broad basis for an on-going Learning and Teaching Performance Fund has been established, it makes more sense, at least for the forthcoming round, to refine rather than reinvent the current model. However, some serious issues must be addressed to accommodate the diversity of the system. Longer term if the funding continues, a more thorough re-examination of the whole methodology should occur.

Timetable for addressing issues beyond 2006

The indicative timetable provided in the Discussion Paper provides for consultation between now and May 2006 when the approach to the 2007 fund will be finalised. This allows insufficient time for the implications of several proposed directions to be fully analysed and understood. It is therefore highly likely that a number of fundamental issues will remain unresolved following the current round of consultation.

The IRU Australia recommends that immediate consideration be given to a longer-term timeframe for addressing more fundamental issues beyond the current round and an appropriate mechanism for enabling consultation with the sector.

Expert Panel

The IRU Australia recommends a more transparent explanation of the role of the expert panel and that it be given a higher profile than at present with possible enlargement of the membership to include technical experts who are closely attuned to current issues in the sector.

Lack of consistency in data collection

The IRU Australia supports measures taken to standardise methodologies used in the administration of the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ), Graduate Destinations Survey (GDS), and also the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ). If response rates remain highly variable then the Group might support the independent administration of these surveys to ensure greater consistency of methodology and results. It would seem appropriate for this function to be performed by the Graduate Careers Council of Australia. The IRU Australia is not supportive of auditing as a total solution to the issue of consistency due to the costs involved. Neither does the Group wish to see the Graduate Skills Assessment or other instruments of assessment being used for the time being.

The IRU Australia recommends that independent administration of the CEQ, GDS and PREQ be considered as an option beyond 2006 if the survey administration remains variable.

Stage 1

The allocation of some funding to Stage 1 has a good deal of merit and would recognise the considerable effort that most universities have gone to in improving both their underlying support structures and actual performance in learning and teaching.

The IRU Australia recommends the adoption of some Stage 1 funding, both to reward universities that develop effective strategies to improve learning and teaching and for the attainment of benchmarks associated with the administration of the various surveys.

Stage 2

Members are not in favour of the inclusion of additional new instruments based on post-graduation data due to the substantial time lag involved and the fact that some of these are not independent of the measures already used. The IRU Australia therefore recommends against use of the Graduate Skills Assessment and Graduate Starting Salaries.

If additional indicators were considered, the Group would look more favourably on the use of a survey for current students such as the First Year Experience Questionnaire (FYEQ) or a mid-course questionnaire.

Adjustment Factors

The current adjustment approach needs to be much simpler. Where adjustments are made to raw data, these need to be simple and transparent. The IRU Australia is not in favour of three options presented in the Discussion Paper which are: use of raw data; maintaining the current complex adjustment methodology; and commissioning of another study to review the adjustment methodology.

The IRU Australia recommends a reduction of the number of adjustment factors from over 50 to many fewer. Possible candidates might include the five listed in the Discussion Paper:

- Size of institution;
- Tertiary Entrance Rank;
- Field of education;
- Type of attendance; and
- Type of admission.

Other factors such as disability, gender, NESB and Indigenous students should be included. The multi-campus factor also needs to be addressed given the evidence that the same person teaching the same subject/unit on more than one campus can attract markedly different teaching scores, which suggests that the overall CEQ could be affected by multi-campus issues.

Ordinal Rankings and Reporting of Outcomes

As the Department points out on its website, the Government has not published a league table of university learning and teaching performance and does not intend to do so. However the table that appeared in the media was collated from the ordinal rankings that were publicly available on the Department's website. It is difficult to see how this misrepresentation of the outcomes enables members of the public to make more informed choices.

The IRU Australia advises against adoption of a star system. For instance, is a five star rating five times as good as a 'one', and is a three star rating 50 percent better than a 'two'? A better system might be to report in bands or clusters (e.g. Band A, B and C etc.) without overall scores.

Mechanisms that allow comparisons of like with like might assist – such comparisons could be made at either the institutional or field of education level. Standardisation of the scores prior to their inclusion in the allocation model should also be explored.

Funding

The Discussion Paper raises the prospect of project based funding. While this might have some intrinsic merit, the IRU Australia argues that it is more important to improve the current methodology before further additions. The Group therefore opposes this proposal.

It is however logical to consider looking at each field of education separately since the variation between fields is one of the major sources of variation. On the other hand, institutions cluster fields of education in different ways into organisational units and this makes comparisons difficult. It could be argued that the data is not sufficiently robust to dissect down to fields of education.

On balance, the Group might support two components to Stage 2 funding – one at the institutional level and one at the field of education level. This would allow universities to be rewarded for "Fields of Excellence". The Group would only consider a dual stream of funding at Stage 2 provided it could be assured of the robustness of the data at field of education level – especially in relation to small samples. One alternative might be for institutional field of education to be considered for funding after meeting a size threshold (relative to total institutional size) and benchmarks for response rates. Only then could it be considered a Field of Excellence for that institution.

Conclusion

As foreshadowed, the individual members of IRU Australia will raise more issues of specific concern to each institution but there is a common determination to:

- Continue along the path of improving the current methodology;
- Establish mechanisms for making improvements beyond the current round;
- Better define the role of the Expert Panel;
- Address the lack of consistency in data collection;
- Limit the use of new instruments for the time being;
- Simplify the adjustment methodology;
- Replace ordinal rankings with clusters;
- Introduce more meaningful reporting to the public at the field of education level;
- Provide appropriate funding for Stage 1; and
- Examine possible dual funding for Stage 2 at the institutional and field of education levels.

The IRU Australia thanks the Department for the opportunity to contribute to the on-going refinement of the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund.

February 2006

Innovative Research Universities Australia