

## Advancing Quality in Higher Education: performance measurement instruments – the IRU response

The Australian Government has released for comment three papers:

- Development of Performance Measurement Instruments in Higher Education;
- Assessment of General Skills; and
- Review of the Australian Graduate Survey

It has also released the report on the development of a University Experience Survey, one of the proposed performance measurement instruments.

The IRU response to the papers focusses on the major issues for the future collection of information on university learning and teaching outcomes, covering:

- the challenge that arise from the multiple purposes articulated for the instruments;
- the student life cycle framework;
- ensuring that the various collections work together to provide a comprehensive picture drawing on input from sufficient students, but no more, in a co-ordinated manner; and
- other issues particular to the various instruments under consideration:
  - the UES,
  - the CLA, and
  - the future role for the Course Experience Questionnaire and Graduate Destination Survey.

### **Summary of IRU response**

The IRU considers it important to retain the basis for performance based reward funding should a Government in future years return to the option. This should drive the extent of the data sets to be collected through the various instruments proposed.

The IRU supports use of the student life cycle as a useful framework for determining the suite of current and potential surveys to provide data on teaching and learning performance. The life cycle approach should drive the sampling of students and graduates to ensure a set of surveys with student samples sufficiently large, but no more, to provide usable information for public accountability.

The IRU supports the independent administration of the surveys which form part of the Government's suite of performance measurement tools. The IRU recommends that DIISRTE should tender the administration and the analysis of each instrument with the aim of using the best mix of organisations to support the multiple surveys.

The IRU recommends that the UES tool, developed with performance funding as the prime use, be used as developed and not reworked to include a wider range of information. The IRU recommends that the UES be tested on enrolled students for its operational validity and if that is demonstrated that value of it replacing the CEQ be explored.

To allow a productive discussion of the CLA as a tool to assess student learning outcomes DIISRTE should clarify that its purpose is to support analysis across time for particular institutions, not to compare institutions, and engage in consultations with universities and related bodies.

### ***The purposes of performance measurement instruments***

The purpose of the performance measurement instruments was initially described as to support:

- the allocation of funding according to a university's change in performance over time;
- providing useful evidence about teaching and learning to prospective students and other interested parties;
- information for higher education regulation such as TEQSA; and
- internal university quality improvement.

The Government has pulled back from reward funding for teaching and learning performance. The question that emerges is whether we should now focus on performance measurement solely intended for information purposes or whether the potential for performance based funding in the future should be allowed for. It is particularly crucial for the UES which has been explicitly designed as a tool to support funding.

The reward funding was based on each university's performance compared with itself over time; information provision naturally tends to comparison across universities. Once there is comparison among institutions the requirements for presentation of the information increase. There is a contrast between the tight, specific set of factors that are needed to underpin a performance funding arrangement and the requirements for information provision where more detailed data is likely to be required with greater concern for precision and accurate interpretation. For example, information purposes drive towards course and discipline based information over institutional whereas for funding purposes institutional level indicators can be sufficient.

The IRU considers it important to retain the basis for performance based reward funding should a Government in future years return to the option. The argument for the value of such funding is clearly made in the Report from the Base Funding Review (section 4.2 and recommendation 10). Hence, continued development of the various tools proposed should retain the capacity to support a funding allocation, with a consequent restraint on the extent of information for other purposes that can be generated.

Overall, much of the data that the instruments will provide will have greatest meaning through an interpretative analysis rather than simple display as public information provision. The Government needs to ensure release of the data is tied to sufficient explanatory information to allow its effective interpretation.

### ***The student lifecycle framework***

The IRU supports use of the student life cycle as a useful framework for determining the suite of current and potential surveys to provide data on teaching and learning performance.

- It should ensure an effective coverage of different stages of students' learning and avoid over-emphasis on some periods.
- It should help minimize the impact on students who need to respond to surveys and other tools.
- Clarity about which instruments will be used, and with which students, will give universities a better basis on which to determine when they add further university level surveys and encourage some rationalization.

### ***Selection of students for performance assessment tools***

Historically Australian student surveys have tended to include all possible students to maximise returns. The statistical attachment to the UES report makes clear that there is no need for national surveys to take a census approach in preference to sampling.

The UES specialist advice only considered that one instrument. The issue becomes more important in planning the suite of collections across the student life cycle. A major challenge is to ensure students participate and do so reliably. There are many factors that encourage student participation which come down to their sense of the purpose of the instrument, belief that the results will be well used, and not being overwhelmed with such requests.

Hence the discussion paper is right to set up the potential for a set of surveys based on student samples sufficiently large, but no more, to provide usable information. In that way the number of times any individual is included can be minimised. The approach requires full use of the student identifier information to ensure effective selection and also to consider avoiding students who have been previously selected, consistent with correct sampling technique.

The exception to this may be the Graduate Destination Survey. At the final point of the process the most useful data could be to gain detailed information on employment or other activity from as many graduates as will reply.

### ***Administration of the instruments***

The IRU supports the independent administration of the surveys which form part of the Government's suite of performance measurement tools. There are three clear advantages:

- it reduces concerns about variable application affecting the reliability of the information collected;
- it supports the coherent application of the suite of tools and a common, cross tool sampling methodology; and
- its is more efficient, as shown in the UES report.

There are issues concerning correct use of student personal information. These need to be worked through to ensure an effective, legal, approach is agreed and then applied.

The independent administration has potential implications for Graduate Careers Australia. Of the instruments under consideration only the GDS is a natural fit for GCA. It administers the CEQ as a historical convenience which no longer holds true, with many bodies independent of universities and Government able to administer surveys and provide suitable analysis.

The IRU recommends that DIISRTE should tender the administration and the analysis of each instrument with the aim of using the best mix of organisations to support the multiple surveys. It should ensure effective analysis of each but also allow analysis in relation to each other. A positive outcome would see more than one organisation involved, to ensure no-one organisation, gains too much influence over the analysis, but with some overlap to gain efficiencies and encourage cross instrument analysis.

### ***The University Experience Survey (UES)***

The UES project has produced an instrument that provides information on student perception of their university experience. It targets factors that other studies have shown are strongly associated with good learning outcomes. The instrument, unlike all others in current use or proposed for introduction, was developed explicitly to support the allocation of funds. The Report indicates that if

designed primarily to support provision of information about learning and teaching experiences a different instrument might have emerged.

The IRU recommends that the UES be used as developed by the project team. This would allow further analysis of its usefulness and intentionally create a set of data that could provide base line information for funding purposes should a future Government decide to support that.

### ***Assessing generic skills – the Collegial Learning Assessment***

The proposal to adapt the US Collegiate Learning Assessment for Australian use has raised many concerns. The discussion paper usefully pulls back the discussion to focus first at the intent – to use direct measures of student learning covering both discipline specific capabilities and others considered generic to all degrees – before considering the options to do so.

The assessment of learning outcomes matched to the UES's focus on evidence of factors known to lead to good learning parallels the proposed internal division for the Teaching and Learning Standards. Having some common data which all institutions use should be helpful to demonstrating standing against the T&L standards once developed.

The challenge of measuring institutional performance over time against performance across institutions is particularly acute for the measure of learning outcomes – where students' initial level of learning, capability, and skill is a major factor in their final level.

The CLA raises two main concerns:

- that it does not allow for differences in the student body across universities; and
- that its US origins inhibit its effective use in Australia.

The first hangs on its use for cross institutional comparison, which was not the initial intent but is now much more likely. Its resolution hangs on use of the CLA remaining focused on evidence of institutional outcomes over time, and not for cross university comparison. The second requires testing. It is explicitly challenged by the AHELO process's efforts to use a modified CLA across many countries and in different languages.

To allow a productive discussion of the CLA as a tool to assess student learning outcomes DIISRTE should clarify that its purpose is to support analysis across time for particular institutions, not to compare institutions, and engage in consultations with universities and related bodies.

### ***The future of the CEQ***

The UES has many similarities to the CEQ. In discussions during its design the argument was made that it is a modern instrument, making use of the learning of the past two decades, which effectively updates the CEQ. It would be possible to replace the CEQ with the UES once (or if) the latter is shown to work effectively in its target group of first and last year students. This would provide similar data from graduates to that which the CEQ provides and permit analysis of (lack of) differences across different periods in the student life cycle from commencing students through to graduates.

The IRU recommends that the UES be tested on enrolled students for its operational validity and if that is demonstrated that the value of it replacing the CEQ be explored.

Whether the instrument for graduates is the CEQ or UES it should be administered as a concluding set within the student life cycle with relevant connections to the surveys at earlier periods. The tie to the GDS is no longer needed.

### ***Future of the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS)***

The GDS is a potential exception. Its collection goes to the nature of the employment graduates achieve whose variability is one point of interest. Continuing to collect the full set of data from all graduates willing to respond would be useful for universities [assuming universities actually use this information at that level] However if the focus is primarily on the total numbers in each of the major post study categories and average salary data then a sample would provide sufficiently accurate data.

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