

Submission to the AGS Review from the Regional Universities Network - a combined response to the three discussion papers.

I write to respond to the discussion papers on the Australian Graduate Survey, generic skills and performance measurement instruments on behalf of the Regional Universities Network (RUN). The Regional Universities Group has agreed on a range of general points that apply across the three discussion papers:

Context

- The higher education environment is in a state of flux, particularly in relation to quality and standards, and this is not a good time to be adding new instruments to the mix. It would be sensible for the sector to work to ensure it develops a coherent system, taking into account the issues raised in the discussion papers, and those emerging from the Base Funding Review and TEQSA's development of standards.

Purpose

- The immediate purpose for the development of new instruments and reviewing the AGS – performance funding – is now off the agenda, for the time being at least.
- The new purpose of supplying data for the My University website to inform student choice opens up a range of questions about the types of information that are actually intelligible and useful to students.
- The other purposes for measuring performance should also inform development of the system. These include possible future introduction of performance funding.
- A legitimate purpose that should be served by performance measures is to provide data to institutions to support their teaching and learning quality assurance mechanisms. The design and administration of any instruments should incorporate this purpose.
- The first steps in improving the availability of performance data should be to develop a comprehensive rationale for the system and clear purposes for each type of data and the methods used to generate them.

Fitness for Purpose

- When a rationale for the system and purposes for individual methods of data generation are in place, the best possible instruments for each purpose should be identified.
- It may turn out that the fittest instruments for the specified purposes are some of the ones that already exist, especially if they are updated and improved.
- New instruments, if required, should be as valid and reliable as possible.

Duplication and Cost

- The system should be efficient and comprise only the data gathering methods that are necessary to achieve the purposes of the system.
- The system should be designed so it consumes a proportionate amount of time and resources, at the levels of the sector and individual institutions.

Sectoral Practice

- There is a contradiction between the expectation that Australia's universities achieve international best practice in relation to measuring performance and the fact that Australia's public investment in higher education does not achieve international best practice.
- There is a danger that an undue emphasis on a top-down, bureaucratic approach for measuring teaching performance and learning outcomes devalues all of the other processes

undertaken by universities to assure the quality of learning and teaching, including the innovations of the past decade.

The RUN group also has the following responses to selected discussion questions in the papers:

Development of Performance Measurement Instruments in Higher Education

What are the current advantages and disadvantages of central sampling of students?

- While the current mixed approach is imperfect, a fully centralised model of administration is likely to result in higher costs, greater standardisation and therefore less sensitivity to context, less effective controls over the system, and potentially lower response rates. This latter would be due to removal of the high levels of commitment that are put into raising response rates at the local level.
- Sampling would probably also produce less useable data at the institutional level.
- RUN universities are concerned about the administrative costs of the current system, particularly the effort involved in securing positive return rates.

Review of Australian Graduate Survey

How can the timelines of AGS reporting be improved?

- The time lag is a problem with the current system, but this could be addressed by uncoupling the CEQ from the GDS and administering the CEQ near the end of first year and the final year of study.
- The GDS would benefit from a more realistic time between degree completion and administration of the survey. Eight months after graduation would be a better time frame. We would favour a longitudinal approach to the general surveying of graduates.
- The RUN universities are of the view that, as a first step, the sector should properly ascertain whether the CEQ, in its current form or an updated one, can meet the expanding information needs of the sector.

Assessment of Generic Skills

What factors should guide the design of performance measurement instruments to assess generic skills?

- The RUN group expresses concern about the use of the CLA to assess acquisition of generic skills.
- There is significant doubt that the CLA is a genuine test of generic skills, particularly the types of capabilities that both universities and employers articulate.
- The CLA would be vulnerable to “teaching to the test” and associated activities that could distort results.
- The whole question of student involvement in the CLA is problematic. Who should pay? Will it be compulsory? Who will be responsible? There are too many problems with the CLA for the sector to consider implementing it in the near future.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the discussion papers.

Yours sincerely,

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