

RESPONSE BY HERDSA TO THE LEARNING AND TEACHING PERFORMANCE FUND ISSUES PAPER

As a key representative body for those supporting teaching and learning in the tertiary sector, HERDSA is pleased to respond to the DEST proposal on the new Learning and Teaching Performance Fund. As a society which strives to encourage the development of a strong teaching and learning community, we strongly support any initiative which will raise the profile of teaching and learning and encourage greater consideration of its development. While we recognize the difficulties of developing a model which will work equitably across all universities, we believe there is potential to develop a system which may, following an initial piloting, promote the overall quality of teaching and learning across the sector.

Prior to reviewing the stipulated questions, we wish to raise three concerns. First, we believe the measures should relate to all student levels, not simply undergraduate. Second, the measures should include those relevant to students who are studying off-shore. The quality of education, and the management of the outcomes needs to reflect the entire student cohort. The inclusion of these additional student groups would greatly encourage stronger attention on developing effective university support and practice. Third, we would argue that there is a danger of forcing all universities to respond to a particular formula – this will not lead to better teaching and learning outcomes. We would encourage the development of an equitable but flexible approach which accommodates diversity and responsiveness within each university.

With respect to the questions posed at the conclusion of the paper, we tender the following responses:

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

HERDSA supports the use of a composite model as we recognize the complex issues which need to be incorporated into any assessment. The model should comprise both quantitative and qualitative performance indicators, enabling universities to develop a responsive and context-sensitive set of measures. We would see the potential for the model to include generic quantitative measures relating to student and staff indicators, and a suite of options from which universities might select a further three which best optimizes their outcomes. Qualitative reports in the form of a teaching portfolio reviewing key teaching performance strategies would also be an important element of any system as it emphasizes fitness-for-purpose responses and measures taken.

While the use of a portfolio is encouraged and perceived as highly beneficial, the load on university's needs to be minimized. The use of already available data would be preferred, and a limit on the size of the portfolio would need to be considered. More discussion needs to be directed towards the use of qualitative indicators. This is important because of the diversity of institutions in the sector with different profiles and different missions and strategic targets. On balance these issues indicate that a portfolio would assist in outlining contextual factors.

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

Please see above for our suggested composite model.

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

Elements of the AVCC model are supported, namely:

- The use of standard generic measures across all universities;
- The opportunity for universities to emphasise their own teaching and learning priorities and measures of performance through both quantitative and qualitative (portfolio) means;
- The application of bands of funding, rather than ranking and other forms of groupings;
- Careful development of a system which reflects the complex mix of university contexts and different kinds of universities.

While there is value in exploring teaching and learning more intensively through the use of expert panels or peer assessment models, the nature of this process would reduce the value and influence of these activities. It is suggested that this particular process is less suited to the incorporation of this strategy, and that it may be better used as a supportive developmental strategy through the National Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.

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?

HERDSA supports the identification and promotion of appropriate measures for the assessment exercise. However, we agree with the authors that there are major challenges associated with many of the measures described in the paper. There are many factors which need to be recognized in the use of quantitative measures. For example, the increased mobility of students at first year level, students' tendency to take time free of study to fund their tuition fees, and students' likelihood of moving to new courses of study rather than directly exiting on graduation need to be recognized. For these reasons, we feel the measures relating to completion rates, retention rates and progress rates would be of questionable value. In addition, they would be very hard to collect from existing university systems. This leaves only a few indicators, such as the CEQ and potentially, a standardized set of questions at the unit of study level which might be included. The rigour of the evaluative processes would need to be greatly increased if these are to be used.

HERDSA supports the encouragement of professionalisation of university teaching through more effective tertiary teacher education. We believe indicators relating to staff would demonstrate some significant inputs into teaching quality. However, there will be a number of issues relating to stipulating that teachers should hold a tertiary qualification in higher education teaching. First, the varying structures at present would lead to substantial inequities across the country. At present, many different universities operate a range of programmes and strategies to provide their teachers with a grounding in tertiary teaching and learning. HERDSA Fellows are another alternative form of validation of teaching expertise. The LTPF would need to be sufficiently flexible to accommodate this diversity OR key principles will need to be developed to provide stronger guidance, and a staged introduction of this criterion would need to be considered. As an expert source in this area, HERDSA would be pleased to work with DEST in clarifying this issue further.

We would also suggest that the scholarship of teaching would be a major indicator worthy of consideration. This would greatly encourage a stronger focus on research and evidence-based teaching practice.

We see difficulties with teaching awards and other indicators which single individual excellence: they do not demonstrate a university-wide systemic process, but rather, reflect individual outcomes. As such, they are not appropriate for this form of assessment exercise.

Evidence of a university-wide approach to curriculum design, development and review is an important indicator which does not seem to have been raised elsewhere. There is an increasing need for the Australian sector to internationalise its curriculum and to ensure standards of achievement at particular award levels.

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?

HERDSA supports the use of a set of indicators to enable triangulation of the data.

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?

Weighted adjustments for course mix, university context and student cohorts would need to be included. HERDSA sees no value in banding universities on arbitrary groupings. Universities need to be considered as unique entities for this purpose.

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 peer review model is only appropriate for developmental purposes, where an honest and open review of the teaching and learning context can generate constructive and creative discussion of potential enhancements. This would not be the case in this context. Therefore, HERDSA would see peer reviews as wasteful of many peoples' time, and of marginal value.

In the initial phase of the scheme, we would discourage any additional elements, such as themes. The first priority must be the careful testing and reviewing of the basic system. Universities will need time to adapt and build better practices to match the established system. Additional themes would create too much hardship.

It is suggested that if themes are to be added, there should be substantial notice of 1-2 years, to enable universities to focus on the strategic theme. Further, this should remain for a period of at least three years to encourage strong embedding of this priority into core practice.

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

Each university may argue differently, depending on their placement on the current league table. From the HERDSA perspective, we would envisage a need to provide stable and predictable benchmarks for universities to monitor and enhance over time. These are the measures which should be emphasized. Ranking is not an appropriate mechanism, as it will reduce collaborative teaching initiatives across universities.

However, HERDSA believes there should also be a strong developmental incentive, so that all universities which demonstrate increased performance can be recognized and rewarded for these outcomes. This will also encourage currently high performing universities to raise their goals further.

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

A whole of institution approach would seem to be most appropriate, as it ensures each university can be represented.

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

There appears little value in grouping universities, although recognition of the challenges associated with being a smaller or regional university might be given.

We trust these responses are of value. Our executive members would be pleased to speak with the DEST panel in its meetings with university representatives in July, to explore these issues further.

Professor John Dearn
President, HERDSA on behalf of the HERDSA Executive