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Comment – Learning and Teaching Performance Fund

By GAVIN MOODIE

The basic principles of the learning and teaching performance fund are good but their implementation seems seriously flawed. It is good that the Australian Government is at last allocating funds for institutions' performance in learning and teaching. By 2008 the learning and teaching performance fund will be only ten per cent of the funds the Government allocates to institutions for their research performance, but it will at least partly offset the considerable and increasing emphasis that governments and institutions give to institutions' performance in research. It seems likely that some institutions will be allocated little if anything from the research quality framework so by symmetry it is arguable that some institutions be allocated nothing from the learning and teaching performance fund.

It is also good for the Government to try to allocate the learning and teaching performance fund by a combination of quantitative measures and expert judgement of performance as it plans to do with the research quality framework. But expert judgement is only marginal to institutions' allocations of the learning and teaching performance fund and the Commonwealth's application of quantitative measures is flawed.

The Commonwealth expanded differences in the underlying data at the second decimal place into ordinal ranks or whole numbers, giving the misleading impression that data, which are in fact tightly bunched, generate a reasonable spread of results. The Commonwealth also collapsed differences in the data of up to five percentage points into just one whole number. These treatments not only lose valuable information but also distort the differences in the underlying data. And as the AVCC points out, neither has the Commonwealth adopted all of the recommendations of Access Economics' review of higher education outcome performance indicators.

The Commonwealth's method has produced some strange results. Innovative Research Universities Australia has found that the institutions on the south-east Australian mainland have performed much better in the learning and teaching performance fund measures than universities in the rest of Australia. Universities in the ACT, NSW and Victoria are 51 per cent of all universities but they occupy 80 per cent of the top ten ranks and 70 per cent of the top 20 ranks. Conversely the institutions in the rest of Australia excluding the Australian Catholic University are 46 per cent of the total but occupy only 20 per cent of the top 10 ranks and only 25 per cent of the top 20 ranks.

The institutions on the south-east mainland dominate student progress or pass rate and student retention in which they occupy 80 per cent of the top 20 ranks and they also dominate the top ten ranks on graduates' overall satisfaction with their program. ACT, NSW and Victorian institutions are over-represented in the top 20 ranks of the proportion of graduates in full time employment, have proportionate representation in the top 20 ranks on the proportion of graduates proceeding to full time study but are underrepresented in the top 20 rank on graduates' satisfaction with good teaching.

It may be that institutions in the ACT, NSW and Victoria have better learning and teaching and resulting outcomes than institutions in the rest of Australia. But in the absence of evidence the more likely explanation is that the Commonwealth's measures are biased in favour of the institutions on the south-east mainland, probably because there is a common factor which the Commonwealth isn't adjusting for.

Perhaps for a related reason the group of eight universities are over represented at the top and the rural universities are over represented at the bottom of the overall rank. The group of eight are 21 per cent of all universities but occupy 40 per cent of the top ten ranks and 30 per cent of the top 20 ranks. In contrast the rural universities are 26 per cent of all institutions but occupy only 20 per cent of the top ten and 20 ranks. They occupy 40 per cent of the bottom 10 ranks and 35 per cent of the bottom 20 ranks.

Rank is not so important for learning and teaching performance funding as where the Government makes the cut between institutions that it funds and those it doesn't. The first natural break seems to be between ranks five and six, which has a gap in total weighted scores of 179 or five per cent of the highest scoring institution. The next natural break seems to be between ranks 14 and 15 with a break of 220 or six per cent of the highest score. Below that the graph is flatter, but the next obvious break seems to be between ranks 24 and 25 which has a gap of 114 or three per cent.

The Commonwealth is probably committed too much to the current method to change for allocations of the learning and teaching performance fund in 2006. The better outcome would therefore be for the Government to allocate the 2006 fund in several bands, as the committee for quality assurance in higher education recommended in its quality reviews between 1993 and 1995.

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References

http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/policy_issues_reviews/key_issues/assuring_quality_in_higher_education/technical_note_2.htm

Group	South-east Australia mainland (ACT, NSW, Vic)	The rest (QLD, SA, WA, Tas and NT)	ACU	Total
Number of universities	20 (51%)	18 (46%)	1 (3%)	39 (100%)
Overall rank 1 – 10	8 (80%)	2 (20%)	0%	10 (100%)
Overall rank 11 – 20	6 (60%)	3 (30%)	1 (10%)	10 (100%)
Overall rank 21 – 30	4 (40%)	6 (60%)	0%	10 (100%)
Overall rank 31 – 39	2 (22%)	7 (78%)	0%	9 (100%)

Group	South-east Australia mainland (ACT, NSW, Vic)	The rest (QLD, SA, WA, Tas and NT)	ACU	Total
Number of universities	20 (51%)	18 (46%)	1 (3%)	39 (100%)
Employ rank 1-10	7 (70%)	3 (30%)	0%	10 (100%)
Employ rank 11-20	6 (60%)	4 (40%)	0%	10 (100%)
Employ rank 21-30	2 (20%)	7 (70%)	1 (10%)	10 (100%)
Employ rank 31-39	5 (56%)	4 (44%)	0%	9 (100%)
Study rank 1-10	5 (50%)	5 (50%)	0%	10 (100%)
Study rank 11-20	6 (60%)	4 (40%)	0%	10 (100%)
Study rank 21-30	5 (50%)	4 (40%)	1 (10%)	10 (100%)
Study rank 31 – 39	4 (44%)	5 (56%)	0%	9 (100%)
Gen skills rank 1-10	5 (50%)	5 (50%)	0%	10 (100%)
Gen skills rank 11-20	7 (70%)	3 (30%)	0%	10 (100%)
Gen skills rank 21-30	4 (40%)	5 (50%)	1 (10%)	10 (100%)
Gen skills rank 31-39	4 (44%)	5 (56%)	0%	9 (100%)
Good teach rank 1 – 10	5 (50%)	4 (40%)	1 (10%)	10 (100%)
Good teach rank 11-20	3 (30%)	7 (70%)	0 (0%)	10 (100%)
Good teach rank 21-30	9 (90%)	1 (10%)	0%	10 (100%)
Good teach rank 31-39	3 (33%)	6 (67%)	0%	10 (100%)
Satisfaction rank 1-10	7 (70%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)	10 (100%)
Satisfaction rank 11-20	6 (60%)	4 (40%)	0%	10 (100%)
Satisfaction rank 21-30	4 (40%)	6 (60%)	0%	10 (100%)
Satisfaction rank 31-39	3 (33%)	6 (67%)	0%	10 (100%)
Progress rank 1-10	7 (70%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)	10 (100%)
Progress rank 11-20	9 (90%)	1 (10%)	0%	10 (100%)
Progress rank 21-30	4 (40%)	6 (60%)	0%	10 (100%)
Progress rank 31-39	0%	9 (100%)	0%	9 (100%)
Retention rank 1-10	9 (90%)	1 (10%)	0%	10 (100%)
Retention rank 11-20	7 (70%)	3 (30%)	0%	10 (100%)
Retention rank 21-30	3 (30%)	6 (60%)	1 (10%)	10 (100%)
Retention rank 31-39	1 (11%)	8 (89%)	0%	9 (100%)