



University of South Australia

Response to the draft compact template and draft performance funding guidelines

Introduction

The University of South Australia (UniSA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the draft compact template and draft performance funding guidelines. UniSA shares the Commonwealth's commitment to 'provide students with high quality educational experiences and outcomes and to build research and innovation capabilities and international competitiveness'. This commitment was reinforced recently with the launch of *Horizon 2020*, the University's statement of strategic ambitions and directions for the next ten years.

UniSA's response to the two drafts acknowledges the Commonwealth's approach, highlights areas of concern and, where possible, offers alternative solutions.

Mission-based Compacts

Introduction in 2011

UniSA supports the negotiation of compacts in 2011. The three-year agreement, with the potential for extending the compact to four or five years, is congruent with the University's approach to corporate planning.

Need for flexibility and support for autonomy

A degree of flexibility is required when planning beyond three years. This should be reflected in the template and in the approach to compliance, which should also support institutional autonomy.

Importance of annual review

UniSA suggests that the annual review allow for revision of weightings, targets and strategies. This is particularly important given that some of the key performance indicators are yet to be defined/developed.

Commercially strategic information must be protected but funding must be disclosed

UniSA supports the Bradley reforms but notes that these have driven major increases in competition within the sector. If the Government wishes to have robust conversations with individual universities about achieving its objectives, then commercially strategic information must be protected.

UniSA suggests that there be agreed public and private versions of compacts, *but* that the public version of a compact should not conceal any funding arrangements between the Commonwealth and the relevant university.

Compacts must be fit for purpose and avoid duplication

While UniSA supports the introduction of compacts, it is critical that:

- the material requested is directly relevant to the strategic purposes of the compact
- indicators are only included if they are directly relevant and reliable
- there is minimal duplication of the requirements of other processes or agencies such as TEQSA.

Research, research training

Research indicators must be contemporary

UniSA notes that ERA underestimates the current performance of universities (particularly younger institutions) undergoing periods of rapid development and hence gives the government a misleading estimate of sector performance. Indicators should as far as possible estimate contemporary performance.

Research indicators must be collectable and verifiable

The draft Compact document lists 14 categories of principal performance indicators and 3 additional categories of indicators which may be proposed by each university. A number of the metrics (e.g. the number of active collaborations and partnerships with industry and other partners in Australia and overseas) do not have an agreed definition.

UniSA proposes that the number of principal performance indicators be kept to a minimum, and each university allowed to choose additional indicators that match its mission.

UniSA proposes that principal research indicators be restricted to measures of:

- *Volume* of research activity (normalised to institutional size)
- *Excellence and quality* of research activity
- *Scale* of research training activity
- *Quality* of HDR student experience (e.g. PREQ measures)
- *Engagement* with end users (category 2,3 and 4 income).

UniSA proposes that any metrics within the principal indicator category have an agreed definition and be part of other standard sector data collection exercises (e.g. HERDC and ERA).

Measures of collaboration are available

UniSA proposes that the proportion of papers published with researchers from national or international institutions, the number of PhDs jointly supervised with other universities and research organisations in Australia or overseas, and the proportion of papers published with industry partners be considered as interim optional or additional measures of industry collaboration.

Compacts a vehicle for assuring the quality of the research training environment

UniSA supports the inclusion of section 7.2 on research training.

UniSA proposes that over time appropriate indicators be developed to assess the volume and quality of research training, the degree of research training collaboration with other universities and alignment of research training with institutional research strengths.

Innovation

The proposed innovation measures may provide perverse incentives

The draft Compact focuses on the collection of volume-based, proxy measures for innovation such as licences executed, patent applications filed and spin-off companies formed. This may lead to the establishment of large numbers of undercapitalised spin-off companies.

UniSA proposes that ‘additional innovation performance indicators’ could include number and value of consultancy projects, number of papers with industry co-authors, number of industry-supported HDR students, number and value of contract research projects with non-academic clients, IP applications, commercialisation income and international project income.

Performance Funding Framework

UniSA welcomes the opportunity to secure additional revenue based on proven excellence or on improvement in participation and social inclusion, the student experience and teaching and learning outcomes.

UniSA supports the reduction in the number of indicators (compared to the suite released in December 2009).

UniSA acknowledges the ambition to have a mix of lead and lag indicators and welcomes the aspiration to include internationally-referenced indicators of teaching and learning.

Indicators unknown

UniSA is concerned that four of the seven indicators are yet to be defined or developed or are currently unknown to the Australian higher education sector. It will be difficult to make meaningful commitments within a compact based on indicator frameworks that are not yet defined.

Cost and risks of development

With much of the development work scheduled over a short time span there is a risk that instruments with poor validity and reliability will be used as the basis for indicators to evaluate institutional performance (see also comments below on Performance Category 2). Reliable indicators can take up to three years to develop.

Survey fatigue and survey oversight

There is a general and long-standing concern across the sector about the number of surveys students are asked to respond to.

UniSA seeks assurance that surveys will be administered under a protocol that minimises the burden on the student population (e.g. via a stratified sample rather than a census), and monitored by a steering group with sector-wide representation.

Surveys must be robust

Administration protocols must ensure that only representative samples are used to reward performance.

Restricted scope of indicators

All of the indicators in the Framework are based upon domestic, undergraduate students. This approach does not take into account the rise in postgraduate professional entry, the increasing importance of HDR training or the central place of international students in Australian higher education.

UniSA suggests that the scope of indicators be broadened where practicable to capture the diversity of the student body.

Post hoc weightings

UniSA suggests that institutions be allowed to adjust their selected weightings once the data are available. This would allow institutions to be rewarded more fully on the basis of their strengths.

Performance Category 1 - Participation and social inclusion

A broad and inclusive indicator

The government's ambition is to 'provide opportunities for people from all backgrounds to participate to their full potential and be supported to do so'. The participation and social inclusion indicators and targets could lead to the unintended consequence of some underrepresented groups being unsupported.

UniSA proposes that the government define the membership of the 'underrepresented group' as all students belonging to one or more of the DEEWR-defined equity groups (i.e. low SES, regional/rural, remote, Indigenous, non-English speaking background and students with a disability).

Technical support required

UniSA welcomes DEEWR's attempt to develop a better indicator of low socioeconomic status.

UniSA proposes that, to aid transparency on this indicator and facilitate institutional planning, DEEWR supply each institution with:

- a copy of its student file populated with the low-SES indicator
- geocoding software that will enable the institution to monitor Census District statistics in its student population.

Performance Category 2 - Student Experience

Duplication of existing resources and an alternative measure of student experience

UniSA is concerned about the proposal to develop a new University Experience Survey (UES) particularly in the timeframes outlined in the Framework. The design of a new instrument

would duplicate the significant investment in existing national student experience questionnaires such as the First Year Experience Survey (FYES) and the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE).

UniSA proposes the adoption of a refined version of the FYES and AUSSE, surveying a stratified sample of final year students nearing completion under the guidance of a national steering group and predetermined protocol. The outcomes of this process would then be used to inform the development of indicators of the student experience.

Experience surveys should be administered to later-year students

The draft proposes that the UES be administered to first- and later-year students. This is problematic in universities like UniSA with a great diversity of student entry pathways and study patterns.

UniSA proposes that students be surveyed towards the end of their degree course (as measured by units completed). This would provide a more complete and timely understanding of the student experience.

Performance Category 3 - Quality of learning outcomes

The view of employers is important

The quality of learning outcomes is ultimately judged by employers, be they in industry, the professions, government or, in the case of many HDR students, academia.

UniSA proposes (consistent with previous feedback) the development of a national employer feedback survey as part of the assessment of quality learning outcomes.

CLA unknown and untested

UniSA has major reservations about the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA).

The Australian higher education sector does not currently have an assessment of this nature and would need to have a much more detailed understanding of its benefits before this indicator was supported. Institutions would require some assurance that the CLA is to be developed in consultation with the sector and DEEWR would need to ensure that the CLA meets the principles of relevance to Australian higher education, validity, objectivity, cost effectiveness and timeliness.

A composite indicator of teaching quality

Likewise, the development of a composite indicator of teaching quality will require extensive consultation across the sector. It should be informed by research being conducted by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council and international best-practice examples with due consideration to the changing nature of the teacher-student relationship and diverse delivery modes.