

Submission to the Department of Education, Science and Training
National Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education
discussion paper

Griffith University is pleased to acknowledge and support the Government's support for higher education learning and teaching. Griffith also welcomes the Commonwealth's extensive consultation on the development of the national institute for learning and teaching in higher education, thus raising awareness of the institute and its aims.

Aims proposed for the national institute

Griffith understands that the Commonwealth has 2 main aims: (1) to raise the profile, and by implication the perceived importance, of teaching and learning in higher education; and (2) to improve the quality of teaching and learning generally, in all disciplines and in all universities. Griffith submits that the first of these is probably desirable; the second is critical.

While Griffith supports the aims proposed for the institute, the strategy for achieving those aims needs further development, and in some respects rethinking.

Relationship with the learning and teaching performance fund

While the discussion paper is clear about the relationship between the national institute for learning and teaching in higher education and the new Australian awards for university teaching, it is silent about how the institute would relate to the 4 international centres of excellence and how it may relate to the learning and teaching performance fund.

Griffith believes that the learning and teaching performance fund would be most effective if its management was informed by the institute's findings, and the institute would have greater impact if it influenced the allocation of the performance fund. Minimally, the institute should advise on the conditions for the first stage of the allocation of the performance fund. The institute should also inform the criteria for the second stage of the allocation of the performance fund. In addition the national institute could be available to work with institutions that wish to improve their performance in the fund.

Teaching awards and national fellowships

The proposed allocation of \$2.7m to increase the number of teaching awards may go part of the way towards achieving the first of the institute's aims to raise the profile of teaching and learning, but is likely to have little impact on achieving the second aim of improving the overall quality of teaching and learning. Teachers who are already identified as excellent will be rewarded (which is good in principle) but the less able teachers will be no more likely to aspire to being a good teacher (or perhaps an award winner) than before. The expansion of the award process will have significant opportunity-costs for Universities, due to the significant investment in preparation of applications for national awards. Expansion of the Australian Awards for University Teachers will result in more resources being redirected out of enhancing the quality of teaching and learning towards the development of individual teachers portfolios. Therefore increasing the number of awards is unlikely to have much systemic value.

The national fellowship scheme was effective in achieving systemic change. Griffith won 1 of 4 national fellowships and found that this had a greater institutional impact than winning an Australian Award for University Teaching. Knowledge gained through the fellowship was disseminated not only within the School and the discipline, but more widely with the recipient engaging in workshops with academic staff across the University. Fellowships could have an even greater impact if they were part of a staff exchange program. The reintroduction of a fellowship scheme should be investigated.

Funding for grants and other activities

Griffith welcomes the allocation of \$19.4 million per annum from 2006 onwards for grants and other activities. However, the university believes that the emphasis of the UK's teaching quality enhancement committee on competitive grants needs to be rethought somewhat. Leaving projects to interested applicants runs the risk of patchy outcomes. What is needed are not more studies that investigate the state of development, but studies that are directed at broad-scale implementation across the sector of what is already known and tested.

The institute should consider commissioning national strategic projects to implement what is already known about quality teaching, achievement standards and quality assurance so that their conceptualisation is academically sound, their scope is truly national and the effects are sustainable within the envelope of funding available to universities in the normal course of business.

The emphasis on human resource development strategies addresses the critical need. Among the bottom half of university teachers, there is little sense of the need to do things differently, and little sense of the immense satisfaction and intellectual challenges that good teaching can produce. That should be turned around.

In Griffith's observation the AUTC's discipline-based projects have not yet had as great an impact on their subject disciplines and professions as is desirable. The AUTC may be relying too heavily on project investigators to coordinate arrangements across the sector and to obtain the cooperation of professional associations. The AUTC or the national institute might consider taking a more direct role in any future discipline-wide projects.

National standards for the development and mobility of university teachers

An additional role for the national institute could be to establish national expectations for the quality of and participation in programs to prepare university teachers and to maintain experienced teachers' skills and use of good learning-teaching practices.

Some staff argue that concentrating on the scholarship of teaching would reduce their prospects of winning appointments at other universities since appointments are thought to be made mostly on research achievement. The national institute could establish standards for the development and assessment of teaching portfolios to facilitate the mobility of academic staff across the sector. The institute could also offer guidance on staff promotion for teaching excellence to each level of appointment.

Work integrated learning

Work integrated learning is a specialised area of learning-teaching which has long been important in the established vocations, but is now of increasing importance in all areas, including the liberal arts and sciences. Employment as a student often leads to employment after graduation, so developing work integrated learning is likely to improve graduate employment rates. The national institute could be most useful in digesting the growing literature on work integrated learning and providing advice on techniques and perhaps even tools for enhancing institutions' practice.

Move focus from dissemination to implementation

An underlying theme of the proposal is a continuation of the design-develop-disseminate approach, with the caveat that dissemination means different things to academics and policy makers. That aspect aside, any focus on dissemination is too soft to achieve lasting results. Given the substantial project funding allocated over several years by the Australian universities teaching committee and its predecessors it should be possible to measure the extent to which innovations that have been 'disseminated' have been incorporated into actual practice and then maintained. Griffith suggests that the emphasis on dissemination should be replaced by an implementation imperative.

One possibility may be for the institute to promote implementation in accordance with McKinnon, Walker & Davis (2000) *Benchmarking: a manual for Australian universities*. The manual identified 11 benchmarks for learning and teaching:

- learning & teaching plan;
- program establishment processes;
- scholarly teaching portfolios;
- teaching environment (teaching induction, workload management, facilities & teaching rewards);
- effective academic review processes;
- fitness of programs;
- first to second year retention trends;
- equity quantitative success;
- student satisfaction; and

- employability of Australian graduates.

These benchmarks could in turn be related to the learning and teaching performance fund.

The national institute could make a valuable contribution by developing systemic responses to systemic problems such as student disengagement and declining retention rates from first year to second year. While a number of universities are addressing this issue in their own ways, some national guidance or resources may be more effective. The national institute could also facilitate benchmarking between universities and facilitate collaborative projects within groups of universities to solve common obstacles in meeting minimum benchmarks.

Mainstreaming teaching and learning expertise

Institutions' learning and teaching units will naturally be closely involved with the national institute. The Australian universities teaching committee already has strong links with the specialist learning and teaching units and has commissioned projects almost exclusively from their members. With some notable exceptions such as Richard James' excellent web site on assessing learning, many of the materials produced by projects commissioned by the AUTC are submersed too deeply in the specialist literature to be readily adopted by mainstream university teachers. It is therefore important that the national institute does not communicate only to and through the specialist units.