Review of the Australian Graduate Survey

Discussion Paper

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1. **Introduction**

1.1. **Policy context**

In 2008, the Government launched a major review to examine the future direction of the higher education sector, its fitness for purpose in meeting the needs of the Australian community and economy, and options for reform. The review was conducted by an independent expert panel, led by Emeritus Professor Denise Bradley AC. The panel reported to the Government in December 2008, making a total of 46 recommendations to reshape Australia’s higher education system.

In 2009, in response to the Bradley Review of Australian Higher Education, the Government announced a comprehensive 10-year reform package for the higher education sector in Transforming Australia’s Higher Education System. Reforms announced included introduction of a demand driven funding system, the establishment of the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), significantly improved indexation on grants, Performance Funding and mission based Compacts.

Performance Funding will encourage universities to improve outcomes for students and achieve national quality, participation and attainment objectives. Facilitation Funding of $94.2 million will be distributed to the sector in 2011, with $27.6 million in Reward Funding available in 2012 for achievement of participation and social inclusion targets.

In the 2011-12 Budget, the Government released details of its Advancing Quality in Higher Education (AQHE) initiative. This provided information on the new performance measurement instruments being developed for use in performance reporting; the University Experience Survey (UES), an Australian version of the Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA), and the Review of the Australian Graduate Survey (AGS). It also provided funding for the development of the new instruments and outlined the consultation processes for implementing the initiative.

The Government’s response to the Review shares a number of features with reform agendas in other areas of "human capital development" such as health, employment services, and disability services that are being implemented in Australia and internationally. These common features include: opportunities for citizens to exercise greater choice between alternative providers; the introduction of funding that “follows the consumer” and thus gives them more power in the service relationship and strengthens incentives for providers to tailor their offerings to citizens’ requirements; improved regulation to ensure minimum quality standards; and improved information on performance to allow citizens to make better informed choices.

The Government’s efforts to improve performance reporting and transparency are aimed at enhancing the quality of information available to students, to give them greater confidence that the choices they make are the right ones for them. The performance of universities has a number of domains, including but not limited to: research, teaching, financial performance, student experience, the quality of learning outcomes and access and equity. Each of these domains has a specific mechanism or tool (sometimes more than one) designed to capture relevant information about performance in that domain. For example, the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) process captures information about research performance; access and equity outcomes are captured through student data collections that include markers for low-SES status; and TEQSA will be implementing teaching standards by which the performance of universities will be measured.
Similarly, the three new performance measurement instruments described above are designed to capture information about how universities perform in the domains of student experience and the quality of learning outcomes. There are likely to be synergies and complementarities with other tools, for example, TEQSA’s teaching standards. They therefore should be seen as part of an overarching suite of performance measures and mechanisms that are designed to capture information across the most relevant domains of university performance, necessary for improving the information available to students as they seek to exercise the choices that are now open to them in the demand-driven system. It should be noted that the newly created MyUniversity website will be used for presenting information to students about performance across the various domains.

1.2. Consultation

The Australian Graduate Survey (AGS) is a national survey of newly qualified higher education graduates, conducted annually by Graduate Careers Australia (GCA). A strengthened AGS is part of the suite of performance measurement instruments that were announced as part of the AQHE initiative. The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) is working with GCA and the higher education sector to review the AGS. The review is examining the strategic position of the survey, and aims to improve the survey content, data collection methods and timeliness of reporting. The review is also considering how to better capture aspects of student experience for external, Indigenous, international and low socio-economic status students.

Consultation for the AQHE initiative includes the establishment of an AQHE Reference Group to advise on the cohesiveness of the three instruments, and the development of an overarching discussion paper, Development of Performance Measurement Instruments in Higher Education. In addition, the AQHE Reference Group will assist in the development of discussion papers on each of the instruments. Consultations and roundtable discussions with universities, business and students will also be held later in 2011 and in 2012.

The Department has prepared this discussion paper based on consultation with and advice from the AQHE Reference Group. The paper raises issues and options for the future of the AGS, with the aim of canvassing views from universities and other stakeholders in the sector. Information on how to contribute to the process can be found below.
2. Principles and the student life cycle framework

2.1. Principles

It is desirable that the development of new performance measurement instruments is guided by principles. Previously the Department has published principles underlying the publication of institutional performance indicators (DETYA, 1998 and DEST, 2001). While these focused on existing data and indicators, these principles can suitably be adapted and supplemented to guide the development of performance measurement instruments:

- **Fit for purpose** – information is used to suit the purposes and objectives for which it has been designed to be used;
- **Consistency** - information is consistently collected and applied across uses and time;
- **Auditability** – information can be scrutinised;
- **Transparency** – information has clear meaning; and
- **Timeliness** – information readily enables institutions to enhance their quality of teaching and learning.

2.2. Student life cycle framework

This section proposes that the development of new performance measurement instruments, including a strengthened AGS, is most appropriately situated within a student life cycle framework. Given the Government’s ambition that 40 per cent of all 25-34 year-olds will hold a bachelor level qualification or above by 2025, the development of three performance measurement instruments will focus on the quality of undergraduate teaching and learning. Further details on the student life cycle framework and its relevance to the Government’s higher education policy can be found in the ‘Development of Performance Measurement Instruments in Higher Education’ discussion paper.

From a life cycle perspective, an undergraduate student can be considered to proceed through three key phases: pre-entry, university study and post-study. Pre-entry refers to when the student first considers entry to university, applying and enrolling in university. There are distinct phases within university study itself, with the first year of study often considered critical followed by the middle years and the final year of study. Post (undergraduate) study includes completion and graduation and post-graduation outcomes, typically focusing on employment and further education.

Within each of these phases, there are different aspects of the undergraduate life cycle that could be considered appropriate to measure. Readiness to study and pathways to study represents key aspects of the pre-study phase. Similarly, support, engagement, experience and satisfaction are crucial for retention in the first year of study. The student’s university experience, engagement, satisfaction and the quality of teaching and learning are all aspects that prevail throughout university study. Possibly more pertinent in the final year of study are the preparedness for employment and achievement of skills. In the post-study phase, key outcomes to be measured include graduate satisfaction, employment and further education and these can be measured at various points in time following graduation.

There are a number of uses and purposes for performance information and these will each lead to different points of emphasis and information requirements. These include: institutional strategic
planning; teaching and learning plans/frameworks; TEQSA provider, teaching and learning and information standards; the Australian Qualifications Framework; and, the MyUniversity website. As a result of these different uses and purposes, requirements will vary for quantitative and qualitative information and national, institution, course or subject level information. The AGS includes two distinct instruments – the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) and the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) (see below for further details on the existing instruments) – which serve different needs for information and fit into the student lifecycle model in different ways.

The GDS indicates graduates' outcomes in the labour market shortly after they have exited the higher education sector. It therefore provides an indication of the benefit of university studies on graduates' skills and personal development at the end of their progression through the higher education system, by measuring the value of the knowledge and qualifications graduates have attained in relation to future employment.

The CEQ measures graduate satisfaction with their university experience as a whole, that is throughout their substantive engagement with the higher education system, from entry until graduation. The CEQ provides an indication of university performance across a range of areas, including teaching, course content and skill development. The CEQ was initially, in its development phase, trialled among undergraduate students. Some universities have in the past administered the CEQ to later year students to derive earlier feedback on the student experience. Thus, the CEQ can potentially be administered across different stages of the student life cycle.
3. Strategic position, role and purpose of the AGS

As the higher education sector moves into a new environment of student driven demand, it is appropriate to review the strategic position of the AGS. The survey has provided valuable information on university performance over a period of four decades. In its current configuration, will the AGS continue to be aligned with the needs of students, business, government and universities? The relationship of the AGS to the full suite of performance indicators being developed under the Advancing Quality in Higher Education package also requires consideration.

3.1. Overview of the AGS

Following the piloting of the precursor of the AGS in 1972, GCA assumed responsibility for the AGS, conducting it on a national basis and attracting funding from the Australian Government to assist in supporting the task. GCA has continued to maintain and develop the AGS since then.

GCA is a not-for-profit company governed by a board of directors, with a Chair appointed by convention from one of the two Universities Australia representatives and with board membership also comprising representatives from business, DEEWR, and the National Association of Graduate Career Advisory Services and two skills-based directors in governance and finance. The GCA Board is informed by advice from the Survey Reference Group (SRG) drawn from representatives from the Department and the higher education sector. GCA maintains an extensive relationship network with survey managers in each participating institution and hosts an annual survey manager information forum and workshop. The AGS surveys new graduates from all Australian universities, and a number of higher education institutes and colleges, approximately four months after they complete the requirements for their awards. The survey response rate for domestic graduates—the primary focus of the AGS—typically ranges from 60 to 65 per cent. While GCA co-ordinates and oversees the administration of the AGS as a whole, individual universities are responsible for administering the survey to graduates from their institution.

The AGS provides detailed information on graduate satisfaction with their tertiary study experience, as well as labour market outcomes for graduates. GCA produces a range of publically available information based on AGS data. Key information is published annually in the reports GradStats and GradFiles, while more detailed data is published in a series of research reports covering course experience, graduate destinations and graduate salaries. Graduate destination and salary information is also available through the Grad Jobs and Dollars internet portal. Results at the institution level are not publicly released.

The AGS includes two distinct instruments – the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) and, since 1993, the Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ). For postgraduate students, the CEQ is replaced by the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire (PREQ). The focus of this paper is on the AGS as it applies to undergraduate students. Although they are administered jointly, the GDS and the CEQ serve distinct purposes. Note, however, that on occasion analysis of the relationship between CEQ results and labour market outcomes is undertaken. The current survey instruments are reproduced at Appendix 3.

3.2. Role and purpose of the CEQ

The CEQ asks graduates about their course experience perceptions. While the CEQ is designed to measure the most significant aspects of the student learning experience, it is not designed as a measure of all aspects of the student experience. Rather than seeking to measure the full range of factors that
combine to form student experience, the development of the CEQ was premised on the association between the quality of student learning and student perceptions of teaching as reflected in formal student evaluation.

Respondents are asked to express agreement or disagreement on a five point response scale to 13 core items. The core items administered by all universities are the Good Teaching Scale, Generic Skills Scale and the Overall Satisfaction Item. Originally, there were a further three scales included in the CEQ – Clear Goals and Standards, Appropriate Assessment and Appropriate Workload. In the late 1990s, additional scales were developed to measure factors affecting student experience which do not relate to formal classroom learning. From 2002 universities have been able to include a selection from eight optional scales in the survey they administer to their graduates. These optional scales are:

- Clear Goals and Standards Scale
- Appropriate Workload Scale
- Appropriate Assessment Scale
- Intellectual Motivation Scale
- Student Support Scale
- Graduate Qualities Scale
- Learning Resources Scale
- Learning Communities Scale

The CEQ currently serves two main purposes:

1. **Continuous improvement.** Universities are able to compare their graduates’ perceptions of course experience with national benchmarks, either at the institutional or field of study level. This allows universities to focus their efforts on improving student experience.

2. **Performance measurement.** The CEQ has formed part of sector-wide performance measures in a variety of forms for over a decade, first published in 1998 by the then Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs. From 2006-2010, CEQ results were used to allocate funding from the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund. DEEWR consulted with the sector on the indicators to be used in future performance funding through the Discussion Paper *An Indicator Framework for Higher Education Performance Funding* (2009), which flagged the ongoing role of the CEQ as a performance measure. Universities’ CEQ results will be published on the *MyUniversity* website from 2012.

### 3.3. Role and purpose of the GDS

The GDS is a survey of the activities and salary outcomes of new university graduates. It looks at participation in further study, full-time or part-time employment, whether graduates are seeking employment, or whether they are unavailable for work or study. Of those graduates employed, the GDS records information on salaries as well as the occupation in which they are employed. Additional analyses, including information about the nature of the employer, successful and unsuccessful job

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search strategies and the relationship between employment and the degree and field of education are also undertaken.

The GDS meets a variety of needs for information:

1. **Labour market analysis.** The GDS provides a detailed picture of the labour market for recent graduates, including salary information. This is of use for employers, students and careers advisors considering study options, and Government (including Skills Australia) when developing policy and programs in areas such as education, workforce development and immigration.

2. **Continuous improvement.** As with the CEQ, the GDS can be used by universities to examine the labour market outcomes of their recent graduates in comparison with national benchmarks.

3. **Performance measurement.** Like the CEQ, the GDS has a well established place in the evolving field of higher education performance measurement. From 2006-2010, GDS results were used to allocate funding from the Learning and Teaching Performance Fund. Universities’ GDS results will be published on the MyUniversity website from 2012.

### 3.4. Future strategic position of the AGS

The Government announced as part of the Advancing Quality in Higher Education initiative the development of a suite of performance indicators for the higher education sector (a summary of the new indicators can be found in the *Development of Performance Measurement Instruments in Higher Education* discussion paper). These indicators will provide greatly enhanced information on university performance. At the same time, the sector is moving towards a student centred funding model. To assist students in making informed decisions about their tertiary education, it is intended that the MyUniversity website will from 2013 include detailed results from the new performance indicators. Higher education sector stakeholders, including institutions, students and Government, will therefore be responding dynamically to a greater range of information sources than has previously been available. Importantly in this respect, institutional level and institution by field of education level data will be made public. While this does not accord with current AGS practice, it is consistent with approaches to publishing performance information previously undertaken by the Department.

This changed environment presents a major challenge to the ongoing relevance and strategic position of the AGS. From being the prime source of nationally benchmarked data on university performance, the AGS will become one of several available data sources. In this context, the ongoing role and value of the AGS needs to be clearly articulated. The AGS may need to be modified to enable the survey to establish a coherent place among the range of new indicators, and to ensure it continues to meet the evolving needs of higher education sector stakeholders.

Given the increasing number of surveys in which university students are being asked to participate, and for which universities are being asked to provide administrative support, the additional value offered by the AGS needs to be clearly articulated. One option to reduce cost and respondent burden would be to move from the current census basis of the AGS, where all eligible students are invited to participate, to a survey sample. This question also has ramifications for data quality, as discussed below.

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Consideration should also be given as to whether the CEQ should move to surveying students, rather than graduates, in line with the other performance indicators being developed. The CEQ was originally developed and tested for use with undergraduate students in the United Kingdom. In Australia, however, it has always been administered to graduates, which may lead respondents to focus on overall course experience (as intended), rather than specific subjects or instructors. Surveying graduates has also allowed the CEQ to be administered simultaneously with the GDS. Conceptually, however, the CEQ measures satisfaction across the whole of the student lifecycle, and there is no inherent reason why this need take place after graduation.

The most notable challenge to the ongoing relevance of the CEQ comes from the new University Experience Survey (UES). The UES will gauge student attitudes towards a number of aspects of their university course, initially at the end of their first year and potentially in their final year of study. The UES will measure aspects of student’s university experience associated with high level learning outcomes such as teaching and support, student engagement and educational development. While not identical to the information garnered by the CEQ, the UES will provide an alternative measure of student satisfaction and course experience perceptions across the student lifecycle. Consideration needs to be given to the value of continuing the CEQ as an additional survey instrument.

Information provided by the GDS will not be replicated by any of the new performance indicators. By its nature, the GDS is a measure of a university’s contribution to skill formation in relation to labour market outcomes and can only be administered at the end of the student lifecycle. Information on graduate outcomes will continue to be of value to the sector. Nonetheless, consideration should be given as to whether the GDS as currently configured is appropriate for the needs of the sector in the future.

**Questions for Discussion**

- Is joint administration of the GDS and CEQ under the AGS still appropriate?
- Will the GDS and CEQ adequately meet future needs for information in the student driven environment?
- Should the basis of the AGS be modified to improve fit with other indicators or to reduce student burden? Would a survey sample be a more appropriate option? What are the implications for the development of the UES for the CEQ?
4. Administration issues

4.1. Administrative model

The AGS is currently organised around a relatively complicated administrative model. GCA manages the AGS nationally, while institutions generally conduct the surveys of their own graduates and return survey forms and/or data files to GCA for processing. This method of management can be characterised as partially decentralised in that while a great deal of the work is managed centrally by GCA, key tasks such as the distribution of survey instruments and collection of responses are managed by the institutions.

Consideration could be given to moving the AGS to a more centralised administrative model. This might produce administrative efficiencies, as well as improve data quality, as discussed below. The involvement of universities could be reduced to contributing student details to a combined survey frame, freeing them of the need to devote resources to survey management, a non-core function in which many institutions lack expertise. A combined survey frame might also be able to make use of the Commonwealth Higher Education Student Support Number (CHESSN) to pre-fill some data items using information from the Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS), reducing respondent burden. A key issue in any centralisation of the AGS would be privacy. Most universities currently have agreements or protocols with their students which restricts their ability to disclose personal details to third parties. Universities may need to reconsider these arrangements to permit student details to be released to a third party for the purposes of the centralised administration of the AGS.

Any change to the current method of delivery of the AGS towards a more centralised model would have major ramifications for the administration of the AGS. This would need careful and sensitive management and would most likely require consideration of the need for transitional arrangements. There would also need to be consideration of improved technology based solutions including, for example, revision of on-line administration of the AGS and enhancement of the current CEQuery tool for analysing free text responses.

If administration of the AGS was centralised, one option might be that the conduct of the survey be outsourced to a commercial research services or a commercial fieldwork services provider. This would leave GCA to focus on high level administration and analysis/dissemination of results. A priori, it might be expected that there would be financial savings, mainly in terms of economies of scale deriving from the existence of fixed costs. However, the costs of centralised administration would need to be tested in the market. A move in this direction is already underway to some extent, as a number of universities have outsourced some or all of their AGS functions to GCA or commercial service providers. For example, the Department is aware of one university which has contracted a third-party service provider to administer the AGS. This initiative was implemented through close collaboration between the university, GCA and the third party supplier. GCA was able to leverage experience with other centralised online and telephone surveys to ensure compliance with the standard AGS methodology. The university provides a list of eligible graduates, which the service provider uses to build a survey frame. An initial response email is sent to graduates from the university (to raise response rates), giving graduates access to the service provider’s secure online survey system. The service provider also sends invitation letters to graduates on the university’s letter head. Follow up calls to non-respondents are made from the service provider’s dedicated call centres. Feedback from the university concerned suggests this
outsourcing arrangement has reduced administrative burden significantly, while improving data quality. The timeframe from the commencement of fieldwork to the provision of a final coded data set has also been reduced substantially. GCA has also been running a centralised AGS data collection and processing service for a number of smaller institutions, as well as running a follow-up survey to the AGS (Beyond Graduation Survey) via a centralised model.

4.2. Timeliness

The AGS currently has a relatively long time lag between the administration of the survey and the publishing of results. Surveys are conducted in October and April annually (of students graduating in June of the same year and December of the previous year respectively). Although preliminary, national level results are available in December of the survey year, detailed results at the institutional level are not available until the following year. For students graduating in 2011, for example, surveys will be conducted in October 2011 and April 2012, with institutional level results available from 2013. AGS timelines compare unfavourably, for example, with the timelines involved in the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE), for which institution level results are available within six months of the survey being conducted. Delays in the delivery of the AGS results are caused, in part, by the length of administration time needed to allow sufficient follow up to reach the minimum 50 per cent response rate required by GCA's Code of Practice for the survey. The requirement to achieve a 50% response rate also impacts on costs and resourcing.

Lengthy timelines complicate the administration of the AGS, as GCA undertakes work on three years’ surveys concurrently. Timeliness will become a more pressing issue in the context of performance reporting. Delays in the publication of results reduces the ability of universities to use the indicators to improve performance, since up to two academic years would already have passed before practices could change in response to survey results.

4.3. Funding

The AGS is primarily funded by direct grant from DEEWR to GCA, made under the Higher Education Support Act. In 2011, this grant was around $660,000. Funding is also sourced from Universities Australia and from subscriptions paid by individual universities. In addition, universities provide substantial in kind funding by administering the survey instrument. In recent years, GCA has incurred financial losses in administering the AGS, and additional funding would likely need to be found if current administrative arrangements are to continue.

Any changes to administrative arrangements (for example centralisation or contracting out of survey administration) would most likely have implications for funding arrangements, both in terms of overall cost and the mix of funding sources (individual universities, Universities Australia and the Government). Funding arrangements should also be considered in the context of substantial additional costs likely to be borne both by the Government and universities to implement the wider suite of new performance indicators.
Questions for Discussion

- Is the current partially decentralised mode of delivering the AGS still appropriate?

- How can the timeliness of AGS reporting be improved?

- Are current funding arrangements for the AGS appropriate? What alternative funding arrangements should be considered?
5. Survey methodology and data quality issues

In the context of a greater focus on performance reporting and a student demand funding model, higher education providers have an increasingly large financial stake in the outcome of performance measures. Given this, it is important that indicators are soundly based, reliable and transparent, and that they are seen to be so by stakeholders. Where performance reporting is based on measured improvements over time, stakeholders need to be confident that indicators are capable of detecting genuine changes in performance, rather than statistical noise. There are a number of areas where the AGS might be strengthened in this regard. Feedback received by DEEWR in late 2010 during consultation on arrangements for university Compacts and Performance Funding Guidelines highlighted concerns in the sector about the robustness and transparency of AGS data.

5.1. Methodology and standardisation

Many of the sector's concerns stem from the AGS's current partially decentralised administrative model. The fact that universities are primarily responsible for collecting data about their own performance can be seen as a conflict of interest, leading to perceptions that universities may 'game' the system. GCA has moved to produce an annual report on the conduct of the AGS. The report will improve transparency, for example by reconciling institutions' survey population summaries with their course completions numbers. From the 2011 AGS on, the report will also be informed by a post-survey operations checklist questionnaire, which will obtain information from institution survey managers on administrative arrangements at the local level. Nonetheless, self-administration by universities has the potential to continue to reduce transparency and confidence in the impartiality of AGS results.

Moreover, since the AGS in practice consists of around 40 individual surveys, there is inevitably some divergence in survey methodology. A review undertaken by GCA in 2005-06 highlighted a number of important inconsistencies in survey practice.\(^4\) In response, GCA worked to improve the standardisation of survey methodology across universities, for example standardising survey forms. Inconsistencies remain, however, in the conduct of the AGS between institutions in a number of areas, including:

- **Communications with graduates:** Engagement material, instrument distribution letters, et cetera are not standardised, although GCA provides details of recommended and inappropriate practices and scrutinises such material when submitted by institutions under a voluntary system;
- **Modes of collection:** Institutions can choose to use hardcopy mail out surveys, emailed surveys or online instruments, while some universities distribute forms at graduation ceremonies;
- **Survey instruments:** Hardcopy forms and telephone scripts have been standardised, but online instruments have not (although GCA tests any online instruments developed by universities to check for compliance with standards);
- **Non-response follow-up:** Some, but not all, institutions follow up non-respondents by telephone to improve response rates;
- **Data processing:** Some universities forward completed survey responses to GCA for processing while others undertake this task themselves. There is potential for inconsistency in coding, imputation, dealing with ambiguous responses, data checking, et cetera; and

\(^4\) Graduate Careers Australia, 2006.
• **Incentives**: GCA suggests that appropriate incentives can improve timely responses, but ultimately leaves the issue of incentives to institutions’ discretion.

It is not clear what impact, if any, these inconsistencies in survey practice are currently having on overall data. Once again, however, there is the potential for these issues to undermine sector confidence in AGS results.

### 5.2. Data quality

Consideration should also be given to the broader data quality issues. Conceptually, the AGS currently operates on a census basis, in that all eligible graduates are invited to respond. GCA procedures mandate that institutions achieve at least a 50 per cent overall response rate. For the 2010 AGS the national response rate was 53 per cent for the CEQ and 57 per cent for the GDS. This is a high response rate compared with other surveys of university students, but is still low enough to raise questions as to data reliability. The two main issues are non-response biases and general confidence in the precision of results, particularly at the sub-institutional level.

The 2005-06 review of the AGS found that biases introduced due to non-response were minimal at the national level, but that greater variation was evident for smaller graduate sub-groups. To ensure reasonable reliability of reported data, GCA guidelines indicate that results based on response rates of less than 50 per cent for a given population should not be published. GCA also provides guidance as to whether changes in institutional performance over time can be considered statistically significant, based on measures of standard deviations. With enhanced performance reporting arrangements, however, stakeholders will likely insist on more systematic quality assurance than is currently built into AGS practices. Moreover, with results potentially made public at the field of education by institution level, the accuracy of data needs to be assured at a relatively fine level of detail.

One option to address these issues would be to conduct the AGS as a sample survey. Arguably, given the response rates achieved, it would be preferable to survey a structured sample of graduates which could deliberately focus on the target groups for which it is necessary to generate meaningful results (for example at the course level or for particular demographic groups). Response rates could well be improved through concentrated efforts at eliciting responses from targeted sample groups. Standard techniques to measure the precision of sample survey results could be systematically applied across all results, for example calculating confidence intervals or relative standard errors.

A sample survey approach would require a relatively sophisticated sampling frame to give adequate coverage across fields of education and demographic characteristics. This process would be simplified if the HEIMS database could be used to construct the sample frame, given that it already records detailed information on student characteristics. As discussed above, an added advantage to using HEIMS data is that student characteristics might be able to be pre-populated in survey responses, reducing respondent burden.

Against this view, it has been suggested that given the small student populations sometimes under consideration (for example, courses where only a small number of students are enrolled at a particular institution), sample sizes needed to provide confidence in survey results would approach the total

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5 Graduate Careers Australia, 2011(a), p. 2; Graduate Careers Australia, 2011(b), p. 3.
population. In this case, it would be preferable to continue on a 'census' basis where the whole population is approached to participate. Technical and administrative difficulties relating to the use of HEIMS data and CHESSNs (particularly privacy concerns) and the timeliness of data should also be borne in mind. These issues are being investigated as part of the development of other performance indicators.

The current partially decentralised administration of the AGS is potentially another barrier to addressing data quality issues. Individual universities may not have the expertise or financial resources to improve quality, while the construction of sophisticated sampling frames would probably only be possible on the basis of a centralised administrative model.

Questions for Discussion

- Will AGS data continue to be reliable enough to meet the needs of the sector in the future? How can data reliability best be improved?
- Would moving the AGS to a centralised administrative model improve confidence in results?
- Would moving the AGS to a sample survey basis improve data quality?
6. Aspects of student experience

The Government has indicated that the AGS review should consider how aspects of student experience might be better captured for external/distance students, Indigenous students, international students and students from a low socio economic status (SES) background. Currently, the AGS records whether graduates were an international student or an Australian citizen or permanent resident, their attendance mode (internal/on campus, external/distance or mixed) and whether they are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. Standard GCA publications provide a breakdown of key AGS results for these graduate characteristics.

Two main issues arise in relation to these groups of graduates. First, the reliability of the information collected. Although response numbers for these groups of graduates are published (and are notably low for Indigenous students, as is to be expected given low numbers of enrolments), response rates are not published. The 2005-06 review of the AGS found that in terms of non-response the AGS is representative of Indigenous graduates and graduates who had studied by distance/externally. Non-response was, however, found to be much higher for international graduates than for domestic graduates (69 per cent compared with 40 per cent). Consideration could be given to putting additional resources into boosting response rates for target groups of graduates under the current AGS model. Alternatively, as discussed above, if the AGS moved to a sample survey basis, sample frames could be deliberately constructed to produce statistically significant results for graduate sub-groups, or at least systematically identify where meaningful results cannot be produced for these groups.

Second, it might be questioned whether the AGS (and in particular the CEQ) as currently constituted will continue to meet the needs of the sector for specific information on these groups of graduates. The CEQ by design asks all respondents the same set of questions regarding their university experience. However, as institutions continue to work to improve outcomes for specific student sub-groups, including in response to incentives provided by performance funding, they may require more tailored information on these students’ university experience. For example, it might be desirable to ask international graduates about their experience of settling into life in Australia, while external/distance graduates might be asked about their experience using information technology to access remote learning.

The current AGS administration does not lend itself to being tailored to graduate sub-groups, since some institutions continue to use standard hard copy survey forms distributed to all eligible graduates. The introduction of supplementary follow-up survey instruments for specific groups of graduates might be considered, although the additional cost, administrative burden and respondent burden would likely prove prohibitive. More practical might be the introduction of additional survey modules relating to graduate sub-groups (whether the AGS continues to use the current census model or moves to a sample survey). This would only be possible if the AGS moved to be wholly based on telephone surveying and/or web based surveys, so that the additional modules could be administered to relevant graduates immediately.

Collecting high quality information on graduates from a low SES background is likely to be difficult and resource intensive. Although the AGS currently records the postcode of graduates’ current address, which could be used to generate information on SES, the quality of this information would be poor as it would reflect graduates’ current living arrangements rather than their family background. As part of the Government’s commitment to improving equity in higher education, DEEWR is working to develop more accurate measures of university students’ SES background, and to link this information with institutions’
administrative processes. It may be possible to link this information to AGS results through the HEIMS database using CHESSN. Such an approach would generate good quality information on SES background of graduates, but would likely only be feasible if the AGS moved to a centralised administration model.

Questions for Discussion

- Does the AGS adequately measure the diversity of the graduate population and how might it be strengthened in this regard?
7. Next steps

This discussion paper forms part of a wider consultation process on the Advancing Quality in Higher Education initiative. Details on this overarching process can be found in the Development of Performance Measurement Instruments in Higher Education discussion paper.

The Government welcomes feedback on the discussion questions outlined in this paper, or on any other important issues to be considered in the review of the AGS. Instructions on how to lodge submissions can be found in Appendix 2 to this paper.

Once feedback to this discussion paper has been received, the Department will collate the feedback and seek advice from the AQHE Reference Group. Issues raised at the Roundtable discussions will also inform the Reference Group’s advice. The Department will provide advice to the Minister on the outcomes of the review of the AGS.

The Department will work with stakeholders to implement the findings of the review of the AGS. Continued publication of AGS results on the MyUniversity website will be subject to review outcomes.
Appendix 1 – References

Barrie, S., Ginns, P. and Symons, R., June 2008 Student surveys on teaching and learning, final report, Australian Learning and Teaching Council.


Graduate Careers Australia, 2006, Enhancing the GCA National Surveys: An examination of critical factors leading to enhancements in the instrument, methodology and process.

Graduate Careers Australia, 2011(a), Graduate course experience 2010: The report of the Course Experience Questionnaire.

Appendix 2 – How to make a submission

We would welcome your comments on the questions and issues raised in this discussion paper. Reviewing the AGS requires a strong evidence base and we would ask that you provide any evidence you have to support your views. Submissions received through this process will be used to inform deliberations of the AQHE Reference Group and subsequent advice to the Minister for Tertiary Education, Skills, Jobs and Workplace Relations, the Hon Christopher Evans MP.

Submissions should be lodged by close of business 17 February 2012.

By email: AQHE@deewr.gov.au

Please include ‘Submission to AGS review’ in the subject field

By post:
Andrew Taylor, Branch Manager
Policy and Analysis Branch
Higher Education Group
Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
PO Box 9880
CANBERRA CITY ACT 2601

Please clearly identify your submission showing

- Name of Organisation or Individual
- If an Organisation, please indicate the name of a contact person
- Address
- Email
- Phone

Please note that all submissions will be published on the Department’s Higher Education website.

DEEWR will not accept submissions from individuals submitted on a wholly confidential basis, however, submissions may include appended material that is marked as ‘confidential’ and severable from the covering submission. DEEWR will accept confidential submissions from individuals where those individuals can argue credibly that publication might compromise their ability to express a particular view.

Please note that any request made under the Freedom of Information Act 1982 for access to any material marked confidential will be determined in accordance with that Act.
Appendix 3 - Current AGS survey instrument
Your course experience

Please tell us about your course experience. The term "course" in the questions below refers to the major field(s) of education or program(s) of study that made up your qualification(s).

If you have completed a qualification with a single major field of education (for example, medicine, architecture, pharmacy, law or physiotherapy), write this major field of education in the box under the heading MAJOR FIELD ONE and only use the left series of response boxes. Check that this major field of education is listed on the front of this survey form.

If you completed a qualification with more than one major field of education (for example, accounting and mathematics, or psychology and sociology), or a combined/double qualification (for example, arts/science or commerce/law), write one major field of education in the box under the heading MAJOR FIELD ONE, a second major field of education in the box under the heading MAJOR FIELD TWO, and use both series of response boxes. Check that these major fields of education are listed on the front of this survey form.

The staff put a lot of time into commenting on my work

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
The teaching staff normally gave me helpful feedback on how I was going

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
The course helped me develop my ability to work as a team member

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
The teaching staff of this course motivated me to do my best work

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
The course sharpened my analytic skills

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
My lecturers were extremely good at explaining things

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
The teaching staff worked hard to make their subjects interesting

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
The course developed my problem-solving skills

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
The staff made a real effort to understand difficulties I might be having with my work

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
The course improved my skills in written communication

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
As a result of my course, I feel confident about tackling unfamiliar problems

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
My course helped me to develop the ability to plan my own work

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐
Overall, I was satisfied with the quality of this course

☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

What were the best aspects of your course?


What aspects of your course were most in need of improvement?


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