

Australasian Council of Deans of Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities (DASSH)

A New Learning and Teaching Institute

What are the strengths and weaknesses of the grants, fellowships and awards and other programmes delivered by the OLT?

Response:

STRENGTHS

As a governmental body, there is quality assurance in the OLT in regard to impartiality and that they have the perception of equality for all higher education providers. This is extremely important in terms of the distribution of grants, fellowships and awards delivered by the Office as well as the notion that, at all levels, excellence in teaching and learning is recognised and encouraged in Australia. If a new body associated with a university or consortia of universities were to take over the role currently exercised by the OLT in managing grants, fellowships and awards, there would need to be a mechanism developed to provide a similar level of confidence in the independence and impartiality of the funding body. It is likely to take considerable time for a new independent institute to achieve the same level of trust and authority that the current OLT has.

One of the greatest strengths of the OLT grant scheme is the provision of funding to investigate (across institutions) and disseminate (nationally) good practice in teaching and learning. It is this combination of funding projects based on earlier work, as well as small-scale demonstration style projects (i.e., the seed grants) that have made the Office such an important source for the promotion of excellence in teaching and learning. Funding projects based on earlier works enhances project value by providing opportunities for further dissemination of the earlier work beyond its original target. It also has the potential to embed good practice more broadly in the higher education sector.

DASSH is concerned that the new body will be “focused on substantial sector wide initiatives, rather than supporting small scale demonstration projects”.¹ This remit of the OLT has been equally as important as the funding of projects based on previous work. These grants provide opportunities for testing new ideas as well as the capacity to adapt discipline-specific approaches for testing in new environments. These smaller scale projects demonstrate the substantial ingenuity and creativity in Australian learning and teaching and should be nurtured. Focusing solely on “substantial sector wide initiatives” and neglecting the small-scale demonstration projects is potentially short-sighted of the new institute.

What has proved invaluable with the OLT funding is that for issues that need a whole of

¹ Office of Learning and Teaching press release, “New institute to promote excellence in learning and teaching”, 13 May 2015 <http://www.olt.gov.au/may2015-new-institute-promote-excellence-teaching-and-learning> (Accessed 6 July 2015).

sector approach, funding has been granted for cross-sector work, not focusing solely on any one institution. The resultant resources—including the development of networks, the ease of sharing knowledge of viable solutions for specific issues, and enhanced quality outcomes across the sector—would not have been achieved without this approach. DASSH would strongly encourage the continuation of this kind of funding in any new institute.

DASSH recognises that one important feature of OLT is that it seeks to redress the sometimes excessive emphasis on research in University recognition of academic achievement.

WEAKNESSES

There are a number of apparent weaknesses in the current programs delivered by the OLT. These fall into two categories: administrative weaknesses and outcome weaknesses.

The administrative weaknesses are largely due to budget constraints. The continued budget cuts to the Office has resulted in a loss of staff and Office resources. With a reduced staff, timelines have been difficult to maintain, there have been delays in the dissemination of information and loss of vital corporate knowledge in areas such as the management of the grants, fellowships and awards. Funding cuts have also affected what support the Office can offer academics. This was keenly felt in the abolishment of their national conferences. These conferences provided opportunities for sector wide awareness and engagement and is something that DASSH would like to see reintroduced.

National awards are essential to recognise quality teaching in higher education. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that, competitive applications increasingly require assistance from administrative units within Universities, for example, Academic development units. DASSH recommends that the new institute should invest some thought into the development of an application process for grants, awards and fellowships that does not generate additional administrative burdens on institutions.

In regard to outcome weaknesses in the current system, these are arguably (1) an over-emphasis on research *per se* rather than the dissemination of good practice, and (2) dissemination strategies that could be more coordinated. There has also been some concern that shifting government priorities may have influenced the types of projects proposed. DASSH acknowledges that there is a need to fund projects that address government priorities, however, this is not to be at the expense of blue sky research or projects that emerge from real world experience.

What can be learned from the past experience of predecessor bodies and equivalent international organisations to assist the development a new programme, within and across fields of study, for leading the promotion of learning and teaching in the sector?

Response:

DASSH feels that what needs to be apparent and at the fore of any new program is the emphasis on quality teaching and learning across the whole higher education sector. The programme needs to be inclusive. While it is very important for the programme to be external, autonomous and objective, without the entire higher education sector being involved this might prove challenging to achieve, as well as a threat to maintaining the credibility of the program.

Another important aspect in the development of a new program is that the time frame and budget dedicated to the new institute is demonstrably sustainable. DASSH is concerned that a limited timeframe and budget does not encourage confidence from the sector that the new institute's establishment is primarily about improving and promoting excellence in teaching and learning. The Government's need to invest in the higher education learning and teaching needs to be apparent.

What are the opportunities for fostering engagement, innovation, enhanced quality and leading excellence in learning and teaching through a new institute?

Response:

DASSH questions the need for this new institute especially as there was no indication that the OLT was not delivering on value for investment or providing the opportunities suggested from the new institute. Without a clear indication of known existing, negative conditions documented, it is difficult to move forward with a new institute that would provide these new opportunities that the OLT supposedly does not.

One opportunity for the new institute is the development and provision of a systematic set of resources for use across the sector. All too often institutions are developing resources that merely "reinvent the wheel". Having a readily accessible set of comprehensive resources would be a valuable asset.

Please provide comments on any other matters of interest, such as governance arrangements.

Response:

As referred to in the first question, the impartiality of the institute and ensuring equality for all higher education providers in the distribution of funds and programs is of utmost importance in establishing the new institute.

DASSH also recommends that the Government ensure that the application and selection process for the hosting of the new institute is transparent and that the timeline for submitting an application is appropriate.

DASSH welcomes the Government's call for written submissions from stakeholders ahead of the roundtable discussions on the establishment of the new institute. DASSH requests that the Government continues its consultation with interested parties throughout the establishment process.