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Dear Anne,

National data collection of applications and offers

RMIT appreciates the opportunity to comment on the development of guidelines for the Establishment of a National Data Collection of Applications and Offers for University Places.

RMIT is very concerned by the logistical complexity of this project and its potential impact on universities’ administrative and technical systems. It is vitally important that the project starts with, and draws upon, the data currently collected through tertiary admissions centres, and that this be complete before further reporting requirements are contemplated. Any additional reporting requirements for individual universities should be kept to a minimum, and it is important that the timeframes allow for this staged implementation.

If you have any questions or require any further information about the points raised herein, please contact Mark Lane, Manager, Statistics and Reporting (markanthony.lane@rmit.edu.au or 03 9925 2061).

Yours Sincerely

Professor Margaret Gardner  
Vice Chancellor and President
Response to DEST Discussion Paper: Establishing a National Data Collection of Applications and Offers for University Places

August 2007
Introduction

RMIT welcomes the opportunity to comment on the development of guidelines for the Establishment of a National Data Collection of Applications and Offers for University Places.

This is a potentially very complex project with a significant impact on university resources and systems. Therefore, it should begin by drawing together the data collected by tertiary admissions centres (rather than the design of a completely new process), with a view to minimising additional reporting requirements. Only after this stage has been implemented should there be any consideration of new processes.

This will also minimise the potential disruption to applicants and students, who may be disadvantaged should complex administration and business changes involved in capturing and reporting data interrupt the smooth processing of offers and enrolments.

In this context, RMIT is also concerned by the proposed implementation date of 2009, given that the full implications and costs of implementation cannot be assessed without the final specifications being available.

The following comments respond to specific questions posed in the Discussion Paper, and recommendations follow.

Timing and Reports

Would linking data for applications and enrolled students pose any issues for you?

Linking applications and enrolment data could be troublesome to capture. The key issue here would be linking multiple applications to the one student. This would not be an issue if the CHESSN were a unique identifier but each applicant will (most likely) have multiple applications with the same and/or different institutions and, in some cases, multiple CHESSNs.

The timing of data collection may also cause problems relating to the ability to resource the extra data integrity checking and the upload process. DEST officers have suggested that the Minister seeks timely as well as final information, thereby requiring institutions to provide progressive data throughout the enrolment period. While this adds to the burden of reporting, it also suggests uncertainties as to what constitutes sensible data collection points. With the push to more flexible admissions practice, trimesters, and an ‘open for business’ culture, more institutions, including RMIT, are taking applications and making offers throughout a large part of the year, but continual provision of data is not practical or useful from DEST’s point of view. Therefore, RMIT recommends only one or two data collection points throughout the year be considered.

How could issues of the same student being given multiple identifiers as they have applied in more than one state or different universities be overcome?

The only way to overcome such an issue is to have a unique identifier for every applicant, but this would be complex and problematic to implement, as well as raising significant privacy issues around storage and use of personal information.

Scope of the Data Collection

Are there any other items we should include in the applications and offers data apart from those listed in the discussion paper?
The scope of the data collection should be limited in the first instance to the data currently collected through tertiary admissions centres. This should form the starting point for broader consideration of additional information required. In framing the scope, the potential value of the data to Government, institutions and researchers needs to be weighed against the cost to the institutions required to collect and report it.

A major concern relates to which institutions might be required to provide data. The paper implies that data relating to all categories of domestic applications and offers will be collected. However, if the requirement for data only relates to institutions with funding agreements with the Commonwealth, then this raises a competitor advantage issue, as commercially sensitive information about fee-paying demand may be available to private providers who are not required to supply similar data. Either the collection should be limited to information about Commonwealth supported students, or all providers should be required to supply the data. Therefore, RMIT recommends that the Government's data collection should be limited just to Commonwealth supported applications and offers, as this is a reflection of the Government's investment.

**Are there any issues for you in including students transferring from the vocational education and training sector to higher education in the applications and offers data collection?**

The same issues are raised in relation to the absence of a unique identifier for these students as they may be applying to a number of institutions/sectors to continue their studies and, as such, may be difficult to identify.

Internal articulating students do not always apply for admission through the same processes and others and therefore reporting this cohort along with the direct and TAC applicants would require cumbersome business process changes. This would be time consuming and potentially increase the bureaucratic burden on students also.

**What sort of implementation issues do you anticipate?**

VTAC currently supplies RMIT with information about applications. DEST should draw together the data collected by tertiary admissions centres before contemplating further reporting requirements for universities.

A requirement for institutions to capture data regarding direct applications would substantially increase current reporting requirements. There is a real risk that enthusiasm for getting the data collection as comprehensive as possible may result in a huge raft of new requirements and the collection of data which may not be particularly useful in the longer term.

RMIT currently collects demographic data when an applicant enrolls, therefore a change in business process would be needed to ensure statistical data is collected when the applicant applies. This would include changes to forms, the online application systems, CHESSN allocation, and system changes to ensure the data can be entered in the admissions module. These amount to major changes.

If additional data is to be collected and reported by institutions at a number of points, there will be an increased impost on institutions in ensuring the integrity of the data is of a high standard. This will increase the burden on collections teams and also on the IT resources required to effect any required system changes and perform the collections. IT storage of the data prior to uploading may also present a longer term storage issue, depending on requirements.
What kinds of publications and reports on the applications and offers data would be most useful from your perspective?
Reports capturing trends across states and nationally would be of interest, but is questionable as to whether the potential complexities and costs of this process would be offset by the value of such reports, especially as the AVCC currently captures and compiles data nationally. Detailed data regarding individual institutions applications and offers should be the property of the institution, and publication of reports subject to privacy and market considerations.

In addition, centralised collection of the data and its publication may not improve the quality of information available to the community. Care would need to be taken to ensure that data (around, for example, ‘clearly-in’ ENTERs) is not used in ways that will be misleading for potential students: no mean feat, given the fact that timely demand and admissions data will not be directly comparable across sectors, institution or levels of qualification, and that this is generally poorly understood by the community.

What sort of format would you like for reports?
The format for published reports will depend on final specifications. The format of reports for use by institutions should probably be in a pivot table format (limited to 64,000 rows). If there was a better software option available for the delivery of the data for increased flexibility of data manipulation/slicing/dicing this should be evaluated ie: a Business Intelligence tool.

If reports to DEST are to be emailed/downloaded then flat files of .csv or .txt type would be best.

Security, access and privacy

What privacy concerns do you think may be an issue for your institution in the provision of applications and offers data to DEST and how could these be addressed?
The privacy implications for government and institutions in collecting, storing and using data relating to applicants for places need to be explored and assessed in the development of final specifications. The legal implications need to be clarified, particularly in relation to applicants who are not yet students of the institution or ‘clients’ of the Commonwealth.

In addition, it needs to be clear from the outset who owns the data and what is a reasonable expectation of its use by the institution and by those external to the institution. Applicants should be made fully aware of the use of their data in a specific Privacy Statement pertaining to the submission of the application. For consistency this Privacy Statement should be supplied by DEST to all institutions. The applicant should also be aware that any new data collection requirements will not be used to base any selection decision on. The privacy concerns will be reduced if the provision of applications and offers data to DEST is similar to the HEIMS interface process (as implied).
Format

Are there any special issues of data comparability that are likely to arise for your applications and offers data?

There is insufficient information in the discussion paper to provide further feedback on this issue.

What other preliminary issues might need to be addressed in relation to collecting and reporting of your applications and offers data?

There is insufficient information in the discussion paper to provide further feedback on this issue.

What sort of IT issues might there be for your organisation?

It is difficult to establish the full impact on our IT resources without knowing the detailed requirements of the collection. However, the changes foreshadowed in the paper would require changes to our data collection system(s) and the amount of storage we will be required to carry and for how long we are required to store the data. The amount of data has the potential to become extremely large within a short time frame.

Complications around supplying data 'progressively throughout the applications and offers process' may arise with the high chance of supplying duplicate data. The process needs to be robust around the treatment of data and the avoidance of duplication as a result of progressive collections.

Finally, a reasonable lead time for implementation will be crucial to success, particularly given the need to discuss specifications with academic management system software providers.

Do you anticipate any specific issues for your organisation in storing the data collection on HEIMS?

There are no anticipated issues for storing the data on HEIMS other than those identified above.

Recommendations

1. That DEST begin by gathering together the existing data from state admissions centres rather than designing another process. Only after implementing this stage should there be any further consideration given to the collection of more data from universities.
2. That, once specifications for the project are confirmed, DEST consult with institutions regarding a reasonable time frame for implementation and support for meeting implementation costs.
3. That data reporting be limited to a few points in the year.
4. That data collection should be limited to information about applicants for Commonwealth supported places.
5. That publication of detailed institution-specific data be limited to those institutions to which the data applies.