Response to DEST Discussion Paper: Higher Education Workplace Productivity Programme

August 2005
Introduction

RMIT welcomes the opportunity to comment on the development of guidelines for the Higher Education Workplace Productivity Programme. The following comments respond to the questions posed in the Discussion Paper.

1. How will these priorities assist institutions in workplace reform and are there other relevant priorities that would contribute to the programme’s objectives?

The emphasis in the Discussion Paper on institutional capacity building – that is, support for projects that will strengthen institutions’ capacity to manage and implement workplace change - is welcome. Whereas State Governments provide funded support for developing TAFE staff capability through targeted professional development programs, no such support exists for universities. Meanwhile, our academic workforce is ageing, and the environment in which we operate is becoming more complex, more competitive, and requires a stronger focus on the needs of students, clients and other stakeholders than ever before. Therefore, project funding which supports higher education providers in effecting organisational change and developing staff capability to respond effectively to this environment is much needed.

A broad range of relevant priorities are canvassed in the Discussion Paper. In addition to those canvassed, projects directed towards understanding and assessing organisational culture and its relationship to change, and which measure and improve organisational climate, staff satisfaction and morale that would also contribute to the program’s objectives. Global competition for academic staff can be intense; and addressing staff retention, motivation and satisfaction as well as recognising and rewarding ‘star’ performers will benefit students and the sector as a whole.

Projects aimed at achieving greater flexibility in cross-sectoral employment (supported by fair and reasonable terms and conditions) and staff capability building across the Higher Education and TAFE sectors would also contribute to the program’s objectives. Inclusion of cross-sectoral capability building, particularly in the context of organizational change initiatives, in the list of priorities would be extremely relevant to the work of dual sector institutions such as RMIT, and would and benefit students seeking greater articulation and pathway choices.

2. Will the competitive funding approach allow institutions flexibility to implement workplace reforms to their individual circumstances?

A competitive funding approach is reasonable and would not necessarily inhibit institutions’ flexibility in implementing workplace reform in line with their individual circumstances.
More important are the criteria which will determine institutions’ eligibility to receive funding. It would be unhelpful to impose additional conditions on access to this fund that might limit institutional flexibility and autonomy.

Secondly, the criteria against which funding is awarded should not be purely performance based, and should allow for a wide range of projects to be considered. Generally, the criteria outlined at 5.2 are sound, but given that this fund aims to build institutional capacity, applications should be assessed primarily on the basis of demonstrated need within the institution. Innovation, collaboration and the potential for dissemination of outcomes across the sector are also criteria worth considering.

**How would the cycle for funding fit with the cycle for the universities’ own strategic planning?**

The timeframe for lodging applications within the first round is short, so the sooner criteria are clarified and disseminated, the more effectively institutions will be able to align funding proposals with strategic priorities.

RMIT welcomes the flexibility implied in the Discussion Paper which would allow for long-term projects to be funded. However, short-term and inexpensive projects can deliver returns disproportionate to the expense incurred, and for this reason we recommend that institutions not be restricted in the scale and scope of projects they seek support for. This will ensure that project applications are tailored to meet genuine need, rather than being overly-driven by guidelines.