1. Purpose

- To provide a summary of the key recommendations of BIHECC’s *Graduate Employability Skills Report* (2007) and to provide a preliminary analysis of some implications for RMIT.

2. Summary and Implications

The role of the Business Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council (BIHECC) is to advise the Minister of Education, Science and Training on ways to increase collaboration between the higher education sector, public and private business, industry, community and other educational organizations. Council membership comprises representatives from across the business and academic sectors, including Professor Margaret Gardner as Vice-Chancellor of RMIT.

In this report BIHECC presents a suite of recommendations to the Minister on strategies for improving employability skills in higher education graduates.

The Council’s overarching recommendation is to establish an Employability Strategy Fund worth $10 million dollars over three years.

A further eight recommendations, carrying funding implications of a further $2.4 million dollars, have been presented to address two broad priorities:

1. The need for more explicit identification of employability skills in all HE qualifications through curriculum mapping
2. The need for better systems for assessing and reporting on employability skills.

Particular emphasis in two of the recommendations is given to the important role that Work Integrated Learning (WIL) can play in advancing employability skills in higher education. BIHECC proposes:

- A feasibility study into the development of national WIL databases or portals, by industry and/or professions to improve access to WIL for universities, employers and students (Recommendation 3 in the report)
- The development of an assessment reporting tool for WIL workplace supervisors to provide valuable feedback to students and universities on employability skills demonstrated through WIL (Recommendation 6).

Overall this report focuses on two areas that are key to RMIT’s distinctiveness as outlined in its Strategic Plan:

- The provision of work- and industry- relevant education and student learning through WIL
- Its strong engagement with industry.

If implemented, this report and its recommendations will have three broad implications for RMIT:

1. It will raise the profile of WIL and of industry collaboration as a focus for the sector.
2. It will make transparent both the high and low performing institutions in these areas.

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1 The University’s new draft WIL Policy gives expression to RMIT’s strategic commitment to WIL. This policy proposes that all RMIT programs include a minimum of one core course where WIL is the predominant assessment, as a measure for fostering graduate employability skills.
3. It invites 38 universities to ‘get better’ at preparing their graduates for employment. For RMIT this is a double-edged-sword – implementation will likely raise the profile and perceived value of WIL thus playing to an RMIT strength but, in parallel, will attract other providers to engage in more WIL activity. The risk here is that RMIT will have to work harder at maintaining its position in the sector as a ‘first-choice provider of work- and industry-relevant education’ as a result of increased competition and more transparent performance metrics.

In summary the report provides a good précis of industry expectations of universities in relation to program content and graduate attributes related to employability.

Note: The status of this report and its recommendations will not be confirmed until after the federal election in November, in accordance with caretaker conventions. In the event of a change of government, Labour would need to assess the relevance of the report in the context of its overall strategy for the higher education sector.

3. About the Report

3.1 Background

The Minister for Education, Science and Training requested that BIHECC examine current approaches taken to develop, teach, assess and report graduate employability skills in universities. Precision Consultancy conducted the research between March and June 2007, and consulted with representatives of universities, business and industry to review current activities and to identify best practice. The RMIT Policy and Planning Group provided input into the research.

Consultation focused on graduates from degree programs across all disciplines of undergraduate higher education. The outcomes of research and the Council’s recommendations to the Minister are presented in The Graduate Employability Skills Report.

3.2 Recommendations

The report presents 9 recommendations. Outlined below are a) the key issue which each recommendation seeks to address, b) the action proposed, and c) possible implications for RMIT.

3.2.1. To establish an Employment Strategy Fund

Issue: Due to the diversity of the higher education sector and the range of courses with vocational and non-vocational outcomes there is no single strategy that can be applied to all Australian universities to enhance students’ employability skills.

BIHECC recommendation 1

- That $10 million of government funding over 3 years be provided for universities to systematically review their work on developing employment skills and to address gaps, in ways that would best suit their situation.

Comments/implications for RMIT: Access to funding would depend on the submission of a 3-year plan outlining what RMIT has been doing to facilitate employability skills to date, gaps and challenges, proposed actions and benefits. It can be anticipated that the University’s WIL and ‘capability-based curriculum’ approaches would position RMIT strongly to bid for funding.

3.2.2. To explicitly identify skills in all university curriculum

Issue: It is not always possible to clearly identify whether employability skills are addressed in higher education qualifications, as many universities have not yet undertaken detailed curriculum mapping.

BIHECC recommendation 2

- That $150k be invested to develop resources to support curriculum mapping for employability skills and that 38 universities be funded to undertake this mapping.
Comments/implications for RMIT: Participation in this curriculum mapping exercise will:
- result in clearly articulated documents about where and how employability skills are addressed in qualifications and courses
- improve communication to students about how programs integrate employability skills
- improve institutions’ ability to provide clear information to employers about how qualifications address employability skills.

RMIT’s approach to capability-based curriculum is likely to place the University well when compared to other institutions at least in the short term.

3.2.3. To improve access to Work Integrated Learning (WIL)

Issue: WIL is an excellent and important opportunity for students to develop critical employability skills in professional settings, however building links with businesses to arrange WIL programs for students is a time consuming and often cumbersome process for universities.

BIHECC recommendation 3
- that a feasibility study be undertaken into options for national WIL databases or portals, by industry and/or profession, where employers willing to offer student placements can register their details and interest and universities can provide details of the placements they require.

Comments/implications for RMIT: If found to be viable, the development of WIL databases will be of significant benefit to the University in easing the administration burdens associated with its many WIL programs. However, a potential disadvantage of the proposed portal for RMIT is that it will increase competition from other universities for WIL placements.

Access to these databases would also be valuable to the University in supporting its Industry Engagement Strategy and existing Industry Portal.

3.2.4. To enhance teaching and assessment of employability skills

Issue: There is no national professional development program for academic staff which assists them to teach and assess employability skills effectively.

BIHECC recommendation 4
- Development of a professional development program with a suite of supporting resources which address best practice in teaching and assessment of employability skills in HE.

Comments/implications for RMIT: This professional development program could be incorporated as a supplement to RMIT delivery of Graduate Certificate of Tertiary Teaching and Learning. There may also be an opportunity for RMIT to participate in the delivery of this program.

3.2.5. To offer students self assessment options for employability skills

Issue: There is support for students being offered some form of self-assessment, so that they can better manage their own learning and development.

BIHECC recommendation 5
- That a feasibility study be conducted into providing students with an opportunity to test their own employability skills using a variety of tools.

Comments/implications for RMIT: The provision of self assessment tools would be a valuable additional feature of RMIT’s Student Learning Hub, the student portal and emerging e-Portfolios. There may be an opportunity for RMIT to participate in the development and / or delivery of these assessment tools.

3.2.6. To explicitly report on employability skills demonstrated through WIL
Issue: Assessment reports by workplace supervisors for WIL programs present a unique opportunity to provide feedback to a) the University on the efficacy of teaching practice and b) the students on their employability skills.

BIHECC recommendation 6
- That a common but flexible reporting tool be developed for WIL workplace supervisors. This report should address employability skills and allow for customisation for discipline specific reporting and required university information.

Comments/implications for RMIT: If found to be viable the development of WIL assessment reports would be of significant benefit to RMIT students in selling their skills to prospective employers. Given the high number of RMIT education programs with WIL components, many RMIT students would benefit. RMIT would also be able to use these reports to review the quality and efficacy of its own practices.

3.2.7. To encourage more effective integration of employability skills in student e-portfolios

Issue: Businesses and universities increasingly support the use by graduates of e-portfolios as a practical method for explaining and evidencing their employability skills.

BIHECC recommendation 7
- That research be conducted into employer preferences for the structure, content and formats of e-portfolios and make findings available to universities so that e-portfolios can better reflect employer needs.

Comments/implications for RMIT: The development of e-portfolios will assist RMIT graduates to provide better evidence of their employability skills in ways that are relevant to employers. This recommendation is timely for the University. A Learning and Teaching Initiative Funded project is currently underway which is trialling and evaluating the use of blogs, wikis and e-portfolios with a view to a broader roll-out in 2008. The product being evaluated is a plug-in to the RMIT Learning Management System (Blackboard).

3.2.8. To explicitly include employability skills in the forthcoming Australian Diploma Supplement (ADS)

Issue: The ADS presents a new opportunity to adopt a nation-wide reporting format for articulating the employability skills of the graduates of a program.

BIHECC recommendation 8
- That when the ADS is produced, it includes a report of employability skills based on the outcomes of curriculum mapping for that qualification, as well as other course documentation.

Comments/implications for RMIT: The ADS as currently proposed is a highly regulated and defined instrument and does not include employability skills. To do so in a nationally consistent way would require sectoral agreement on definitions. To date the consortium developing the ADS has agreed that such information is best dealt with via ePortfolios and this is the recommendation that will be presented to Minister Bishop in December.

3.2.9. To encourage businesses to provide structured cadetships

Issue: Many employers believe that cadetships offer valuable opportunities to take a student with potential, and train them in the workplace whilst they are studying at university – yet there is no support from government for this approach.

BIHECC recommendation 9
- That work is undertaken to investigate ways in which companies that offer structured cadetships could be eligible for tax relief.

Comments/implications for RMIT: RMIT has already initiated a successful IT cadetship. The cadetship model is likely to be extended to other RMIT programs to provide more opportunities for
both VET and HE students to link theory to workplace practice and for the University to extend implementation of WIL. It is not clear how government would treat any such profile changes arising from cadetships.

4. Recommendation:

That VCE note this report.

5. Further Information:

The full report and BIHECC’s advice to Minister Bishop can be accessed at: http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/programmes_funding/programme_categories/key_priorities/business_industry_higher_education_collaboration_council.htm#Reports

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