



**Australian Government**

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**Department of Education,  
Science and Training**

**Establishing a National Data Collection of  
Applications and Offers for University  
Places**

**Discussion Paper**

**June 2007**

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## Executive Summary

In a new era of historically low unmet demand for university places, the timing is ideal to improve understanding of the dynamics of demand and supply in the higher education market.

Currently, there is a lack of consistent, comprehensive data available on applications and offers. This is despite keen interest in demand and supply from a range of stakeholders. Data which is not nationally consistent and often preliminary can be used to draw incorrect conclusions which may be to the detriment of stakeholders. For example, prospective students may base decisions on incorrect information concerning the number of places available.

The \$3.5 billion *Realising Our Potential* 2007-2008 Budget package has provided an opportunity to develop a national data collection of applications and offers for university places. The *Realising Our Potential* package will promote a more flexible framework for universities to meet the needs of students and employers. New funding agreements for universities will reflect improved requirements for governance, financial accountability, quality and data reporting in return for more flexible arrangements for funding student places.

A new data collection will be established to make standardised, comprehensive data on applications and offers for university places simultaneously available to all. As well as publishing nationally consistent applications and offers data, the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) will also publish a range of reports analysing the data, designed to make the system and outcomes of the applications and offers process as transparent and useful as possible to all stakeholders. The breadth and detail of the new collection will benefit researchers, policy makers, higher education providers and students.

DEST will seek to ensure that the new systems and reports are of maximum benefit to all stakeholders and impose minimal burden on higher education providers and Tertiary Admissions Centres.

The purpose of this discussion paper is to seek views from higher education providers, Tertiary Admissions Centres and other interested parties on the best approach to the collection and publication of nationally consistent applications and offers data to ensure that the potential advantages of the new system are realised as efficiently and expeditiously as possible.

This paper proposes a number of key discussion questions relating to the establishment of this new data collection. Responses should be submitted to the Department of Education, Science and Training by close of business, Monday, 20 August 2007.

## Introduction

In the past, stakeholders have relied on statistics from individual institutions, state based Tertiary Admissions Centres and the media during the applications and offers process from about November to February each year to gain an understanding of the strength of student demand and the ability of the higher education sector to supply graduates. This has caused confusion due to the non standard nature of these statistics and the differences in timing of their release. A more comprehensive report is published by Universities Australia (formerly the Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee) at the conclusion of the process in about April or May each year.

The potential to develop a comprehensive, national data collection of applications and offers for university places has been made possible by the 2007-08 Budget *Realising Our Potential* package. A significant boost to Australian Government investment in higher education was announced in this package. This includes the establishment of the perpetual, \$5 billion Higher Education Endowment Fund. \$1.7 billion in additional funding is also provided, including distributions from the Fund, for a range of higher education initiatives aimed at ensuring Australia's long term economic prosperity by strengthening our universities' resources, and allowing universities to be more flexible and responsive to the needs of students and employers. Under the \$211 million Allowing More Responsive Universities measure, funding agreements for universities will reflect improved requirements for governance, financial accountability, quality and data reporting in return for more flexible arrangements for funding student places.

An additional \$222 million is also provided in the Realising Our Potential package to improve access to tertiary education for students.

## A National Data Collection

The improved data reporting requirements will involve the provision of data on applications and offers for university places. Under section 19-70 of the *Higher Education Support Act 2003*, higher education providers are required to provide such statistical and other information the Minister for Education, Science and Training by notice requests. The Minister will request the applications and offers data when the consultation process is completed and DEST has IT systems in place to receive the information. Data will be requested from higher education providers that receive funding under the Commonwealth Grant Scheme.

The aim is to:

- Collect data on university applications and offers in a standard, nationally consistent format at key points in the application and offer process;
- Store this data in a national database; and
- Report to all stakeholders on the data in a more timely, consistent and detailed manner than is currently possible.

The applications and offers data will be consolidated to form a new data collection that will make standardised, comprehensive data on applications and offers for university places simultaneously available to all stakeholders. DEST will also coordinate, manage and publish reports on this data.

This national data collection will help all stakeholders to form a more accurate and detailed picture of demand for higher education. In the longer term, we see this data linked to information on enrolments and completions already held in DEST's higher education statistics collection. This will allow academic pathways all the way from application to graduation to be understood for the first time at the national level.

Better national information on higher education will complement data on the vocational education and training sector giving a more comprehensive picture of post-school education in Australia.

The collection will be established with appropriate regard to issues of privacy and confidentiality of the data.

## **The consultation process**

A new national system for managing and reporting on applications and offers data is a significant undertaking. This collection will require DEST in consultation with higher education providers and Tertiary Admissions Centres to design, set up and maintain appropriate electronic systems.

DEST will consult widely with the sector to identify the most efficient and effective way to establish the new data collection. DEST is concerned to build a system that will meet the needs of stakeholders and that will not place unnecessary administrative burdens on higher education providers. Wherever possible, we aim to make the most effective use of existing systems at DEST, higher education providers and Tertiary Admissions Centres.

This discussion paper is this first stage in the consultation process. DEST welcomes comments and suggestions from all interested parties. The closing date for written submissions is 20 August 2007 (see *How to make a submission*, for more details).

DEST will also conduct consultation fora with interested stakeholders in most state capitals during July and August.

## **Timing and reports**

DEST aims to have a national data collection for applications and offers established for the 2009 academic year. A trial of the system involving a small data sample will be conducted during the applications and offers process for the 2008 academic year.

Higher education providers and Tertiary Admissions Centres will be invited to participate in the trial. DEST will not report publicly on the trial, although reports on

methodological issues may be made public. DEST will give a full statistical report to trial participants, including, for each higher education provider (and Tertiary Admission Centre), a confidential report on each institution's own data compared to the average for all participants.

Once the process is fully established for the 2009 academic year and beyond, it is envisaged that data would be provided progressively throughout the applications and offers process. Detailed reports would be available to individual providers, while high level, national reports will be made publicly available at key points throughout the process. A data set for researchers will also be developed that would become available at the conclusion of the applications and offers process for the start of the academic year. A second data set including mid-year applications would be available in the latter half of the academic year.

In the longer term, a data set that linked applications and offers data to other student data already stored in the Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS) would also be developed. Linking could be achieved through the use of a unique identifier for each applicant (giving due regard to issues of privacy).

**Discussion Question:**

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

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?

## Scope of the Data Collection

Currently, stakeholders do not have access to comprehensive, nationally consistent data on applications and offers for university places. This is in contrast to other countries such as the United Kingdom where a great deal of information is publicly available including age groups of applicants, gender, and application information by institution. The lack of comprehensive data for analysis purposes in Australia has impeded research on market trends.

Tertiary Admissions Centres report to DEST and Universities Australia at agreed points in the applications and offers cycle. While this information is useful and gives a broadly accurate picture of demand for higher education each year, and over time, it covers only those applicants who apply through Tertiary Admissions Centres during the annual applications and offers process. It excludes prospective students who apply directly to higher education providers and those who apply mid-year. Although precise figures are not available, these are both fairly large groups and appear to be growing. It also appears that numbers vary substantially from year to year.

In addition, current arrangements do not allow for analysis beyond the basic, limited fields included in the standard tables. For example, the only age split available is for applicants aged 20 years and under and those aged over 20 years and a gender split is missing altogether. DEST and other researchers cannot currently examine emerging issues and trends without requesting special reports from Tertiary Admissions Centres. This imposes significant additional burden on the Tertiary Admissions Centres and is unlikely to yield timely data.

The present data collection supplied to DEST and to Universities Australia covers domestic undergraduate applicants who apply for the start of an academic year to university through Tertiary Admission Centres. We propose in the future to additionally collect data on the following:

- Domestic undergraduate applications made directly to higher education providers, including students articulating from the VET sector;
- Domestic postgraduate coursework and research applications made directly to higher education providers;
- Domestic postgraduate coursework and research applications made indirectly through Tertiary Admission Centres; and
- Mid-year applications.

DEST also proposes to collect information on courses applied for and places offered and accepted, together with applicant demographics, ENTER scores and other background characteristics of applicants. We will invite higher education providers and Tertiary Admission Centres to send us a list of data fields that they currently collect together with details on formats and applications used.

This expanded scope will enable more detailed and timely analysis of trends and issues in demand and supply. It would also improve understanding of the various pathways to university study.

Universities Australia would be able to receive the same level of information as agreed to be given to DEST.

To avoid possible confusion over the release of the data we propose to make the information available to state and territory governments shortly before publishing it.

**Discussion Questions:**

Are there any other items we should include in the applications and offers data apart from those listed in the discussion paper?

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?

What sort of implementation issues do you anticipate?

**Discussion Questions:**

What kinds of publications and reports on the applications and offers data would be most useful from your perspective?

What sort of format would you like for reports?

## **Security, access and privacy**

The data will be stored in the Higher Education Information Management System (HEIMS) and will conform to current security requirements.

Individual higher education providers will be able to access individual records for both verification and their own research purposes. Access would be through a web browser using a log on as is currently the case for the higher education statistics collection.

National reports which will be publicly available will provide information at a much higher level to safeguard privacy. Fields to be made publicly available, including to researchers, will be negotiated with the sector. Reports provided by UCAS in Britain could be used as a starting point.

**Discussion Question:**

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?

## **Format**

An important part of the consultation process will be discussion with higher education providers and Tertiary Admissions Centres about how data is currently managed and shared, and how existing arrangements can be mapped on to a new national data collection. DEST currently envisages a simple flat-file format for the data in order to minimise disruption to higher education providers' and Tertiary Admissions Centres' existing administrative and data management processes.

**Discussion Questions:**

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

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

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

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

## How to make a written submission

Written submission should be made by 20 August 2007 and addressed to:

Ms Anne Gregory  
Director  
Analysis Unit  
Policy and Analysis Branch  
Higher Education Group  
Loc 133  
DEST  
GPO Box 9880  
Canberra ACT 2601

Or by email to [NationalData@dest.gov.au](mailto:NationalData@dest.gov.au).

If you would like your submission to be kept confidential, please indicate this clearly at the top of your document or in a covering note. If only part of your response is confidential, please put that part on a separate page or pages.

Unless you request that your submission be treated confidentially, submissions may be made publicly available on the DEST website as part of the consultation process. You may also wish to note that because DEST may be required to release your submission by the operation of law, or of a judicial or Parliamentary body or Government agency, the Department can give no undertaking that your submission will never be made publicly available.

If you have any questions about this paper or the National Data Collection of Applications and Offers please contact:

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An electronic version of this discussion paper is available at:  
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