Evaluation of the Commercialisation Training Scheme

Summary

The Commercialisation Training Scheme (CTS) was established to provide 250 higher degree by research (HDR) students each year with the skills necessary to bring research-based ideas to market. The CTS was announced as part of Backing Australia’s Ability – Building Our Future through Science and Innovation, in response to an apparent lack of researchers able to enter or liaise with the commercial world.

The CTS was designed in 2006 by the former Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST). Funding was provided for three years with the first round of funding delivered to eligible higher education providers (HEPs) in January 2007. At the inception of the CTS, the Research Block Grants (RBG) funding mechanism was already in place and operating for a number of other programs. By adopting this existing cost effective funding mechanism, the department was able to avoid developing new processes to administer the CTS. In 2007, as part of the machinery of government changes, the administration of the CTS was transferred to the Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research (DIISR). The CTS is a terminating program and funding will cease in December 2011.

An evaluation of the CTS was undertaken from September to November 2010. This report presents the findings and recommendations from the evaluation.

In preparing this report, the evaluation team undertook desktop research, analysed CTS non-financial reporting data, and consulted with 12 selected HEPs. In addition, a survey of 125 current and completed CTS students was undertaken.

The evaluation found that it was appropriate for the Australian Government to support commercialisation training for HDR students in relevant research areas. Nearly all universities consulted believed HDR students received insufficient training in the skills targeted by the CTS.

The evaluation found that support for commercialisation training aligns with the government’s long term strategic priorities. The government’s Research Workforce Strategy (RWS), released in early 2011, provides evidence that generic skills including those used in commercialisation are important for HDR students and policy reforms are needed to reflect this.
The student survey indicated that 98 per cent of students were satisfied or very satisfied with the training they had received and 92 per cent would recommend the CTS to their colleagues. A majority of respondents had already utilised the training or expected to do so in future employment and believed that future employers would value their CTS qualification. Some concerns included a lack of exposure to practical skills; difficulties balancing CTS training in conjunction with their research studies; and that some courses were not targeted to the needs of research students.

The evaluation found that by the time the CTS ceases being delivered, HEPs will have utilised approximately two thirds of CTS funding and enrolled and completed on average two thirds of the student target. The remaining funds will be recouped by the Commonwealth.

Overall, the evaluation determined that the original intent and program design was managed well, within the RBG framework. It was found however that, as the CTS is a small program in the RBG, the allocation formula did not allow for funding to be diverted to HEPs with the highest demand for commercialisation training. The performance based Research Training Scheme (RTS) funding formula may therefore not have been the most effective predictor of HEP demand for, or ability to supply commercialisation training. In addition, influences such as capacity, interest, marketing expertise and resources meant that some universities were not able to develop courses that generated enough student interest to fully expend their allocated CTS funding.

For the final year of delivery the department has worked with HEPs to consider options to participate in CTS. As a result an increased number of HEPs choose to opt out of receiving CTS funding. Therefore, a greater proportion of HEPs receiving funding in 2011 will have a demonstrated capacity to effectively use all of their CTS funding than has previously been the case.

The evaluation sought to determine the cost of a semester’s training. Due to the variance in the way universities interpreted the CTS non-financial reporting forms for student enrolment and completion data, this proved challenging. Most HEPs also offered stipends at an amount equivalent to Australian Postgraduate Awards (APAs) bringing the total cost per place to around $22,000, consistent with the per student cost implied by prescribed minimum funding for HEPs.

While existing key performance indicators (KPIs) for the CTS are being met, the evaluation found the KPIs could have more closely measured the scheme’s objectives.

The evaluation considered a number of different approaches, some outside the scope of the evaluation, to address the efficiency and effectiveness of any future commercialisation training initiatives. Key recommendations included:

- **Consistent with the findings of the Research Workforce Strategy, consider extending Australian Postgraduate Awards to four years to support generic skills training, including those used in commercialisation.**

- **Explore alternative funding / delivery mechanisms to the research block grants and RTS funding formula for small-scale or niche commercialisation training programs.**

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