

Workforce Futures: Towards an Australian workforce development strategy

ATN Response

As a group of universities committed to the national and international productivity agenda, the **Australian Technology Network of Universities (ATN)** welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Skills Australia papers '*Workforce Futures: Towards an Australian workforce development strategy*'.

As the group of universities most closely linked to the professions we have a significant role to play in addressing the future skills needs of the nation. We educate 20 percent of Australia's graduates, our retention of disadvantaged students is above the national average and critically, our first year commencements from TAFE award courses sits above the national average at 10.4 %. (2006, national average 9.7%).

The ATN supports a system which is underpinned by the principles of flexibility, innovation and better developed pathways between the educational sectors of secondary school, VET and higher education. Such a system will ensure Australia has the effective mechanisms for ensuring a workforce that is sufficiently prepared to meet both national and local skills needs.

This submission will address certain key issues identified by the Background Papers, noting that individual ATN members have specific views on questions raised in the Papers and may make their own more detailed submissions.

A national approach

A robust, productive workforce requires certainty about the capacity and quality of the tertiary sector to deliver education and training that is responsive to industry needs. For an Australian Workforce Development strategy to fully realise its potential in contributing to Australia's productivity a co-ordinated national framework that links all sectors of secondary school, VET and higher education with business and industry is fundamental. This requires a cooperative approach from State and Commonwealth Governments to facilitate pathways and remove barriers to the development and funding of innovative,

industry-relevant qualifications (including those which bridge sectors and can be delivered outside institutional settings). A national tertiary agreement would represent co-operative action between the Commonwealth and the States facilitating development of a higher education sector that is flexible and responsive to labour market needs. Such agreements would ensure consistency with broader national objectives while at the same time effect balance between student demand and labour market needs that meet the circumstances of each State. The newly established Ministerial Council for Tertiary Education and Employment (MCTEE) has a critical role to play in brokering such an agreement.

Impact of workforce development on the higher education sector

Building workforce capacity to support productivity remains a challenge for the entire population, across all sectors, and no less within the tertiary sector. Universities' core business is creating the human capacity to meet the workforce requirements of a prospering national economy as well as providing solutions to global problems. Background Paper One: *'What does the future hold'*, identified that the industries expected to grow in the next five years are:

- healthcare and social assistance,
- education and training,
- retail,
- professional, scientific and technical services
- accommodation and food services

These projections have a significant impact on higher education sector workforce as recent data¹ reveals that university disciplines where more than 50 per cent of the academic workforce are over 50 years of age include general education (60 per cent), teacher education (60 per cent), curriculum and education studies (59 per cent) and nursing (51 per cent). Thus, in the very professions predicted as high demand, universities are facing an acute shortage of the academic staff required to develop the required skilled workforce.

There exists high level recognition of the imperative of securing the future academic workforce. For example the Department of Industry Innovation Science and Research through a range of activities, is

¹ Hugo, G (2008) The Demographic Outlook for Australian Universities' Academic Staff

examining research workforce issues such as the need to meet the impact of an ageing academic workforce and wider workforce demands for people with higher degree by research (HDR) qualifications. It will be important for Skills Australia to consider the outcomes of such work before finalising the broader strategy.

Summary

A truly national approach to workforce development must be one that recognises the contribution of a range of agencies and stakeholders. As a significant contributor to addressing Australia's long term productivity challenge, the ATN is extremely supportive of a national workforce development strategy that is reflective of the role of higher education plays in underpinning a highly skilled workforce. From a higher education perspective a strategy that supports people to participate effectively in contributing to Australia's economy and allows them to develop and apply their skills in a workplace context will require:

- an alignment and harmonisation of Commonwealth and State government funding and regulatory systems
- recognition of the role of higher education in delivering education that meets workforce demand
- a system wide approach to academic workforce renewal.

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