

Future university workforce: smart ideas to navigate change

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We should seize the opportunity to shape the university sector, argues Andrew Vann.

Last week the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association released a report by PricewaterhouseCoopers on the future of the higher education workforce. This was driven by a view from universities that change was coming and that we needed help in thinking about how to navigate it.

It is sometimes said that universities are slow to change, but a look at the statistics shows this is not the case. For example, government statistics show that between 1996 and 2012 the number of award course completions in Australia doubled. In the same period, the number of international students increased sixfold.

It is a remarkable story of success. During this same period, student satisfaction with teaching rose significantly and research publications per non-casual academic more than doubled. Until the global financial crisis, full-time employment rates for graduates were maintained and even in 2012 were above the levels in the early 1990s recession.

In 1996, when I first arrived in Australia, the internet was a relatively new phenomenon and Google an interesting idea by a couple of PhD students. What we used to call computer-based learning was a research topic for PhDs. Now, about one-third of the world's population have a smartphone in their hand. The default word for information search is Google and we are starting to think the default educational delivery mechanism may be online.

While there has been a lot of change in the higher education space across this period, what has not changed very much is our idea of what an academic career ought to look like.

Academics are supposed to teach, research and do some administration on the side. Academics are supposed to dedicate their lives to their discipline inside the academy and to develop deeper and deeper

knowledge in a particular area so they can become a global expert in their field. In return for this dedication, they are to be rewarded with employment protection for life.

Above all else, academics are supposed to focus on earning competitive grants and publishing papers in international peer-reviewed journals to enhance personal, departmental and institutional esteem. What is to be protected is the research-teaching nexus, the crowning achievement of Western academic practice. The only trouble is the truth of the system belies this ideal.

While the sector doubled in size from 1996 to 2012, the number of teaching-research staff increased by a measly 10 per cent. At the same time the number of casual staff and research-only staff doubled.

The administration load probably has more than doubled as documented quality and compliance requirements have (necessarily) increased, yet most of that load falls on the only slightly greater number of continuing teaching-research staff employed.

This means that those academics who grumpily feel weighed down by administration probably have a point.

Some would say all of this change has been negative and we should put things back to the way they were before the Dawkins reforms. That way we could get back to the purity of our ideal of what an academic career should be.

To me, that would miss the point. It would require us to put our economy back the way it was then too and that is simply not desirable or realistic. We need to find our way to a post-mining boom economy that requires high skills, a highly educated nation and closer engagement between academe and industry to drive innovation. We need a higher education workforce that suits that task.

We have an exciting opportunity to shape different ideas of a higher education sector and a higher education workforce, where academics can specialise and are rewarded for strengths in academic management, teaching, industry engagement and research; where there is flexibility for people to move between industry and academic careers, or to blend them both; where casual staff are not treated as a means to balance the budget but recognised as a core part of the academic community.

The Higher Education Workforce of the Future report maps out options for all universities to think about but recognises that each will have to walk its own path. It's going to be an interesting future, and we need to design it carefully if it is to deliver for Australia and to provide satisfying and fulfilling careers for university staff.

Andrew Vann is president of the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association.

Online article: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/opinion/future-university-workforce-smart-ideas-to-navigate-change/news-story/c6ff1777e2f0c0e49e26cc16a8213d64>

Printed article titled: 'Smart ideas to help shape the career opportunities to come'