

EDUCATION

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Action urged on uni staffing

Joanna Mather

University experts are urging an investigation by the Productivity Commission into university workforce issues to avoid further blowouts in student-to-staff ratios.

The move comes as the federal government pushes for greater participation in higher education.

Leading demographer and University of Adelaide professor Graeme Hugo said the independent commission should examine the university teaching workforce, in line with a similar review under way in the vocational education and training sector.

Australia could not afford to be complacent when other countries were pouring resources into attracting top academic talent, Professor Hugo said.

In a new report prepared for Universities Australia and Professions Australia to be released today, Professor Hugo identifies the disciplines of teaching and nursing as having the largest concentration of older academics.

Pharmacy, computer science and banking and finance have relatively younger contingents, but engineering, law and accounting sit in between.

Professor Hugo said: "Part of my plea is that I don't think we should be complacent and say the system, which has served our universities well over the last 30 or 40 years in terms of recruitment, is necessarily going to be as good over the next 30 or 40 years." He said the stature of a report by the Productivity Commission would help draw appropriate attention to the issue.

Professor Hugo's comments come after the NSW Auditor-General named the ageing of the academic workforce as one of the most pressing "financial and reputational" challenges that universities faced.

In a report to state parliament, Auditor-General Peter Achterstraat warned of an impending wave of retirements. A quarter of the state's university academics are aged over 55 and 40 per cent aged 50-plus.

The report highlighted rising student-to-staff ratios nationwide and expectations of a war for academic talent globally. It urged vice-chancellors to take action to

Universities executive director Vicki Thomson said there was a "crisis in work force supply" and a "crisis in Commission investigation might help, although the issues were already fairly well known. "We have an ageing workforce, poor career structures and limited pathways," she said. "The work that needs to be done is around how we encourage people to see a long-term career in our sector as a viable option."

The Department of Innovation, Industry, Science and Research is already conducting a review of the research workforce. It is examining projections for future supply and demand of people with postgraduate research training.

The study includes demand from universities as employers, but the CoE backed the idea of a broader investigation by the commission, saying a focus on teaching academics was also needed.

Reducing student-staff ratios will be tough, as the present average is 20:1 — much worse in some cases — and student numbers are rising due to the federal government's expansion agenda.

University enrolments are this year nearly 10 per cent above target, equating to an extra 44,495 places and bringing the total domestic cohort up to nearly 500,000.

Universities Australia chief executive Glenn Withers said the federal Education Department was conducting its own studies of academic workforce needs and the results should be considered before any broader investigation such as one by the Productivity Commission.

But there was enough evidence in Professor Hugo's latest report to compel the government to include academics on its revised list of in-demand occupations for skilled migration, he said.

Professor Hugo said it took about 10 years to produce an academic and even then only half took up university teaching posts. The rest find work in the government or private sector, where demand for PhD-qualified people is on the rise and wages are nearly always higher, particularly in sectors like mining.

Mrs Thomson said growth in workforce demand was predicted for healthcare, education and professional, scientific and technical services.

Renewed focus for round table

Joanna Mather

A regattanised Business-Higher Education Round Table has honed in on tertiary education drop-out rates and gaps in the agribusiness workforce in an attempt to address skills shortages.

B-HERT's new president Peter Tyree said high dropout and non-completion rates in the vocational education and training (VET) and university sectors meant many millions of dollars was being wasted every year.

He said investing in vocational guidance and work experience for students both at school and in the early years of post-secondary study would help address the problem.

"The numbers are too big to ignore," he said, pointing to estimates of dropout rates as high as 60 per cent in some apprenticeship areas. "We need a national program to allow people to really choose and be passionate about their career."

B-HERT members include universities, industry groups and businesses. Mr Tyree is actively seeking new members and hopes to grow its influence.

He is eager to be involved in discussions about how best to invest the \$660 million Skills for Sustainable Growth package announced in the May federal budget. The round-table board has endorsed plans to pilot a comprehensive skills development scheme focusing initially on agribusiness. It would bring industry and tertiary education providers together to promote careers in agriculture and primary industries and offer placements for students, possibly at both school and post-secondary levels.

The idea is not a new one, nor is it without widespread support. Universities Australia has lobbied for national internship programs in the hope of making graduates more work-ready. Round-table board member and University of Ballarat vice-chancellor, David Battersby, said the group was well placed to act as an "independent broker" between educators and businesses.



The university workforce ... student-to-staff ratio is crucial. PHOTO: GLENN HUNT

avoid skill shortages, particularly because "funding also restricts universities' ability to offer competitive salaries, working conditions and research resources".

New modelling by a coalition of leading universities, the Group of Eight, suggests an extra 40,000 tertiary teachers will be needed over the next 20 years to bring student-to-staff ratios back to a more acceptable level.

The figure does not account for the tens of thousands who will need to be replaced due to retirements.

CoE executive director Michael Gaughan said workforce renewal was among the most urgent issues for universities.

"At the moment there are a whole lot of gaps in our supply capacity," he said. "We know we're losing academic staff and... we're not getting enough PhD completions."

The numbers of doctorates being completed is an indicator of supply because the qualification is the entry level for employment by a university. Australian Technology Network of