

## Push for tax help to meet shortages

*Rachel Lebihan*

Universities have called on the federal government to give tax incentives to employers to provide paid internships for students and retraining opportunities for older workers. This is necessary to meet the growing workforce needs of the resources sector as major new projects come on line.

The Australian Technology Network of Universities, in response to the National Resources Sector Employment Taskforce's "Resourcing the future" discussion paper, has also recommended that scholarships for international students be increased to help meet Australia's mining skills needs.

ATN executive director Vicki Thomson told The Australian Financial Review that the government and industry had to think outside the box to address skills shortages, given that in many fields the problem was to persuade students to take courses.

"If we look at the resources sector, it's not as if the incentives aren't there," Ms Thomson said.

"Especially in fields of particular demand, such as engineering, the financial incentives are considerable. It's a matter of getting the students into the qualification in the first place.

"What we are proposing is that government and industry start looking at other ways of making that happen."

Ms Thomson said upskilling existing workers was an obvious strategy, although one for which there was little support.

Short training courses, improved pathways into tertiary programs from industry, and more use of technology to provide short stints of modular training rather than prolonged study using normal semester formats would go some way towards improving skills in the existing workforce.

However, Ms Thomson said the government would need to provide incentives to encourage industry to use these and other options.

One solution might be the provision of funding to offset the cost of study for existing workers to obtain degree or associate degree qualifications part time in partnership with universities.

In terms of increasing the number of school leavers in these degrees, Ms Thomson said potential lay in providing co-operative programs, which have been successful internationally. In Canada, for example, students combine study with paid internships for which they receive course credits, and government provides a tax credit to the employer.

Another solution is to remove the payroll tax for student employees from those industries that partner with tertiary institutions to provide meaningful internships.

The ATN has analysed the Canadian co-operative programs that have resulted in higher employment rates, which have been spawned by its partner institution, the University of Waterloo in Ontario.

Another advantage of co-operative programs where students spend a proportion of their time in the workplace is that they alleviate pressure on university teaching places.

Ms Thomson said skilled immigration would also be needed, and the ATN is advocating an increase in scholarships to attract the highest quality candidates.

The ATN recommends that scholarships be increased in targeted areas including all aspects of minerals and resources engineering, petroleum engineering, electrical, metallurgy, geophysics, geology and chemical engineering, and mechanical engineering.

Ms Thomson acknowledged that many of the issues would require a partnership approach by government, industry and universities.

The ATN comprises Curtin University of Technology, University of South Australia, RMIT University, Queensland University of Technology and University of Technology, Sydney.

The universities teach 30 per cent of the country's mining engineers at all levels and 36.5 per cent of undergraduate mining engineers.