

Doctoral centres sharpen business links

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Opinion

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Business and universities need to work more closely together. It's become a mantra at this point, and for good reason.

After all, most university outputs end up being used by business and industry in one way or another. When it comes to research conducted by academics, a large proportion is either designed to put theoretical concepts into a more applied context or just simply produce something that can be used in the real world. Even blue sky research will often eventually lead to practical applications.

The link with teaching is even more obvious. Australia's universities produce the nation's skilled workforce in all areas that drive the economy. It's in everyone's best interests to ensure communication and collaboration between universities and industry about which skills and capabilities are needed to continue driving economic and social growth.

Of course, it's a lot easier for businesses to engage with research. Research is undertaken in very specific areas with clear objectives and with inbuilt mechanisms for engagement. Universities can easily identify and make a case for a company's involvement in a particular piece of research and vice versa, and there are dedicated funding mechanisms designed to encourage this involvement.

With teaching, it's somewhat more problematic. Again, when it comes to specific fields that are directly related to their core business, universities and industry work well together. This is particularly evident among the various professional bodies and the accreditation of degrees in their specialisation, for example, Certified Practising Accountants Australia, Engineers Australia and the Australian Medical Council will accredit university degrees in their fields. When there isn't a clear responsible body, however, that's when engagement is more challenging.

The much-discussed generic skills are a perfect case in point. One of the key recommendations contained in the recent paper released by the Business Council of Australia taskforce on Education, Skills and Innovation is that universities and business need to work together to improve the value and relevance of what is taught in courses.

This is not a new issue. Government-commissioned research from more than a decade ago raised the same concerns, identifying employers' desire for graduates to possess greater communications, interpersonal and business skills.

The problem is that, in contrast to specific fields, engaging with universities to address these issues has no clear responsible body and instead requires a widespread willingness and commitment by the business sector as a whole.

As Michael Andrew, the chairman of the Business Council of Australia's taskforce, said only recently, "what will be crucial to achieving this is to make sure that we do not simply expect the sector to do all of this on its own. Australia's business community needs to invest more of its expertise, time and resources in higher education."

However, the onus can't be entirely on business. Universities also need to make it easy for business to engage in shaping the teaching and learning process, preferably in a way in which they can also see direct benefit from that engagement.

As the government has identified in its recent strategies, it is time for Australia to explore new ways of training graduates.

The universities' Australian Technology Network (ATN) initiative to establish an Industry Doctoral Training Centre in mathematics is one avenue that might help build greater partnerships in teaching between business and universities. The centre is designed to establish true and enduring partnerships between universities, business and students in the provision of postgraduate education.

Beyond simply providing short-term work experience or internships for students, industry partners will work with highly motivated and skilled research students over the course of the four years of their PhD, on either substantive long-term projects or a series of inter-linked shorter projects.

Doctoral training centres give students the opportunity to further develop their generic skills in a real world setting. The benefits for the business sector are clear, beyond supporting the acquisition of those skills by students.

Such centres, funded by government, have been highly successful in the UK, where they have grown from seven in 2002 to 71 in 2011, representing £338 million (\$521 million) of public investment.

Major industry partners such as Pfizer, Microsoft and BP have seen the return on investment and benefits to being directly involved in teaching, and competition among students to be involved in these programs is fierce.

Everybody wins. The question now becomes, can we make something similar work in Australia?

A group of universities is willing to try something new in Australia which has been proven elsewhere. Government has expressed its interest and support for the concept and will be watching its outcomes. The ATN is confident that it can recruit the right students with the skills to succeed. The only risk of failure is if the business and industry sectors do not back the idea.

For years, the lack of generic skills by graduates has been bemoaned, and the need for greater engagement between business, industry and universities has been espoused.

Clearly, the strategies that we have been using thus far are not enough to address the issue. It is time to explore new ideas and create the opportunities for industry to play the greater role in university activities that it has been requesting.

If Australia is to build the quality of its education as a key driver of its economy, it must be with a collaborative and holistic approach.

Business, government, universities and students all need to work towards a shared understanding and common goal of making the the nation's graduates the best they can be.

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