



Industry report finds unis lacking in energy

Rachel Lebihan

Universities have been issued a dismal report card by senior industry managers who believe the sector is ill-prepared for crucial national energy issues such as emission trading, renewable sources, and nuclear technology.

The federal government has also been admonished for its out of date energy policy, which the industry believes has left universities hamstrung in attempts to plan for the nation's future energy needs.

A survey of the energy sector by the Australian Technology Network of five universities found that 60 per cent of respondents did not think university energy-related education was up to scratch.

When asked what areas were being ignored, the overwhelming majority (64.3 per cent) said nuclear energy, the next highest area of concern was renewable energy at 35.7 per cent.

The national president of the Australian Institute of Energy, Murray Meaton told *The Australian Financial Review* that many organisations, including universities, had "struggled to keep up" as energy issues changed rapidly with pressures such as global warming.

"The emerging issues such as emission trading, renewable applications in grid systems, efficient use of energy, nuclear policy and more effective means of promoting competition in energy supplies all need to be addressed," Mr Meaton said.

"Nuclear energy has been overlooked and it is hard to blame universities when a number of state governments are reluctant to entertain any informed discussion."

Mr Meaton said the energy debate had moved rapidly in recent years and the federal government white paper was "well out of date".

Industry would contribute to the development of new policy



Senior managers believe university energy-related education is inadequate.

measures but government had to take the lead.

ATN executive director Vicki Thomson said while university delivery of energy-focused education had been criticised, the message from business was that the government lacked a cohesive energy policy.

"If industry is saying we're not delivering, it's saying it in that context," she said.

Ms Thomson said a report of the survey findings that will inform course development and possible changes will go to ATN vice-chancellors by May.

The ATN then planned to follow up the major issues with industry associations and government agencies.

The chief executive of the Energy

Networks Association, Andrew Blyth, told *The Australian Financial Review* there were skills gaps in the higher technical skills area, such as protection, design and systems operations. More graduates with specific power engineering qualifications were also needed.

"Many universities have either ceased offering this course or their infrastructure is very old," Mr Blyth said.

However, on the question of nuclear technology, Mr Blyth said universities should be "concerned about reflecting needs of the Australian energy industry in 2007".

"While every effort should be made to look to future requirements, it is the current energy industry

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requirements that should be of paramount concern.”

Mr Meaton pointed to a shortfall of graduates in technical areas of energy supply and use, which he said had become less attractive to university entrants. The ageing profile of the workforce also meant most technical areas, such as electrical engineering, faced staff shortages as engineers moved into retirement.

The ATN survey, which canvassed 240 energy professionals, reported that 94.7 per cent of respondents felt there should be external professional involvement in setting up energy courses.

Mr Meaton said universities generally did consult with industry and the competition between them

for students helped to ensure courses were current.

“However, there is always a case to argue that more is better than less and we support a continuing dialogue,” he said. “Industry

“The ATN announced plans to pilot aptitude testing.”

organisations can help with course structures and case studies of practical relevance to students.”

Mr Blyth said while it had been common for universities to design courses and then offer them to prospective students, with little or no industry input, “that philosophy is changing”.

The ATN also reported that

84.2 per cent of respondents felt there should be additional testing of undergraduate applicants at the interview stage.

The ATN announced in the past week plans to pilot aptitude testing of engineering applicants to test their ability to think scientifically, solve quantitative problems, critically analyse information, and display interpersonal understanding.

“It may be that we might go to the [energy] industry associations and talk to them about their view of this strategy,” Ms Thomson said.

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