

## University workforces need to evolve fast to meet big challenges

Universities need to change quickly to attract students in an increasingly competitive environment, writes Stephanie Fahey.



Greater specialisation in research or teaching would improve productivity. **Craig Abraham**

by **Stephanie Fahey**

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If universities of the future are to become digitally enabled, multicultural, flexible, collaborative, highly efficient and competitive in attracting students, then their workforces also need to evolve. While some universities are already responding to increased specialisation, they need to go further and faster.

To start with, universities should revisit the idea of what constitutes an academic position. Traditionally, all academics are required to be educators and researchers, and offer an element of community service – usually in a 40/40/20 split.

Universities could improve productivity by allowing – and actively encouraging – greater specialisation in research or teaching. This would enable academics to play to their strengths. Given that "natural teachers" often have very different personality profiles than "natural researchers", allowing specialisation is likely to improve quality and job satisfaction for both cohorts.

With innovation now a central Commonwealth policy, universities are under increasing pressure to focus on research that addresses large, complex, real-world problems. This type of research requires multi-disciplinary teams and closer collaboration with industry – demanding senior researchers who are capable of offering industry partners their full-time focus. For many disciplines, a more focused research cohort would also enable faculties to engage more closely with industry, government and the community.

## GOOD ACADEMICS GIVING BAD LECTURES

From an educational standpoint, with increased importance attached to a quality learning experience, universities need great lecturers who understand that teaching is about more than "telling". Most universities recognise that teaching is a skill in its own right and invest in improving lecturers' teaching proficiency.

However, anecdotal evidence and student survey feedback suggest many universities still have good academics delivering bad lectures. Universities need lecturers who can facilitate interactive sessions that keep students engaged, motivated and thinking.

Teaching quality will also improve if lecturers are given more time to specialise within the teaching "value chain". Currently, lecturers are often involved in course development, creating digital course materials, course delivery, course assessment, course administration, coaching in writing skills, student support and wellbeing. Many of the administrative and support elements could be resourced more cost-efficiently by non-academic staff – or even outsourced – leaving more time for academics to focus on higher-value tasks.

Moving to greater specialisation of the various facets of teaching will require universities to genuinely improve administrative productivity – by changing how they do things – not just removing administrative staff and passing on additional burdens to academics.

This will require universities to accelerate their adoption of proven better-practice service delivery models that harness digital technology. This should include finance, HR, IT and client (student) support, in addition to the application of digital to blended learning models. Although some universities have attempted to introduce these models, many still have significant scope for improvement.

## SWITCH IN PRIORITIES

Finally, to make specialisation work, universities must rethink their performance management and promotion systems. The university of the future should encourage and reward all career paths that contribute to the goals of the university, not just the researchers or prolific publishers of research material.

Workplace practices are another area for improvement. Currently, the university teaching workforce is highly casualised with low levels of job security. At least 60 per cent of Australia's academic workforce is sessional and the majority are young and female. Research suggests only 12 per cent of casual academics are casual by choice.

Universities should encourage job-sharing with other employees or other employers. This would reduce casualisation, allow such people to enhance their learning and professional careers, and build better links between universities and industry, government and the community.

It would also help universities to attract younger recruits with the right work profile to replace its ageing workforce. In the next five years, estimates suggest the Australian university sector will need to replace almost half its staff – 50 per cent of whom are baby boomers, compared with a quarter of the population overall.

In the future, a university's academics and professional staff will require an enhanced and contemporary work environment. University workplaces need to be more open in layout to facilitate collaboration and interaction – not unlike the emerging Wi-Fi-enabled "student hubs". Universities also need to improve digital literacy, including social media, of all staff, because students will expect their learning to be supported by collaboration and discussion on social media.

To remain relevant in this dynamic environment, unions need to actively support the above approaches, which will improve overall productivity levels of our universities as well as the quality of teaching and learning. At present, workforce agreements are evolving too slowly, with the status quo defending itself.

We believe the university sector and its key stakeholders need to reach an agreement on a vision for the academic workforce and actively assist it to transition.

**Stephanie Fahey is EY's lead partner for education in Oceania.**

Online article: <http://www.afr.com/leadership/innovation/university-workforces-need-to-evolve-fast-to-meet-big-challenges-20160310-gng1e9>