

## PwC's university workforce report ignores key topics like gender

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AHEIA president and Charles Sturt University vice-chancellor Andy Vann. Picture: Ray Strange

A \$350,000 report on the university workforce of the future has failed to mention gender and the negative correlation between gender, casualisation and seniority.

The report commissioned by the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association says that the future workforce needs to be agile, flexible, professionalised and specialised, as well as the “interface with public and private industry”.

But it doesn't address the feminisation of the casualised teaching workforce or barriers to promotion for women.

AHEIA president Andrew Vann said gender and casualisation were huge topics of debate for universities, but PricewaterhouseCoopers, the report's authors, had instead focused on “general structural things”.

“But there is no doubt all universities are struggling with gender implications within their academic workforces,” Professor Vann said.

The report predicts ongoing upheaval in workforce structure and capabilities, saying much more extensive industry experience and engagement among academic staff will become de rigueur, while casualisation can be expected to increase. It also suggests the PhD as a pathway to an academic role might become “less relevant”.

But critics say the report was scripted with a conclusion in mind.

“It was designed to feed back to university leaders just what they fed into it — that staffing policy was crucial to universities’ future and that staff had to be more flexible,” said Gavin Moodie, an adjunct professor of higher education at RMIT.

“The report also ignores everything that was outside the consultants’ limited frame of analysis, including gender.”

Jeannie Rea, national president of the National Tertiary Education Union, said the report was based on outdated ideas of how academics behaved.

“It’s trying to make an allegation that there is a bunch of academics out there hanging around in ivory towers not doing very much. That is so far from the truth, it’s unbelievable. Just how they came to that idea in the first place is very difficult to understand,” Dr Rea said.

Dr Moodie said the report “posed a multitude of problems claiming the sector will be ‘ruined’ if it doesn’t follow the authors’ prescriptions”.

“But these problems are supported by weak, if any, evidence,” he said.

The report is also riddled with inconsistencies.

While calling for “greater use of specialised casual employee roles” it calls for “career coherence” for people in roles that “oscillate between industry and higher education”.

“In some cases long-term casual roles ... could be transitioned to permanent over time, and in some cases an increase in the casual workforce may be appropriate,” the report says.

Dr Moodie said the report would have been “far more useful had it considered ways of increasing casuals’ job security while retaining much of the lower cost and flexibility that universities seek. It would have been useful to evaluate the various proposals and pilots in universities.

And in a damning critique of their own workforces, “only 5 per cent of university leaders rate their employee value proposition as being ‘very high’ ”. This might make it difficult to “compete for talent on a global scale” the report concludes.

Online article: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/pwcs-university-workforce-report-ignores-key-topics-like-gender/news-story/454923c6b3cbf3e37ed1030f2a33185f?login=1>

Printed article titled: ‘Key topics left out of PwC workforce report’