


Integration is the key to the future

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Australia needs an integrated tertiary education system in which higher education plus vocational education and training operate as one but they retain their separate identities.

The rationale is strong. Those entering the workforce today are likely to have three or four careers before they retire, such is the changing future of work.

To equip themselves, it's likely that they will move between the vocational education and training sector, and the higher education sector, to ensure they have the knowledge and skills required to remain employable. It's in this context that we need to rethink the tertiary education system, ensuring that it supports the workforce of today and tomorrow. Australia's tertiary education system currently is not equipped to deal with these challenges.

Every few weeks a new study is published that suggests between 40 per cent and 70 per cent of the jobs in Australia today will disappear as a result of advancing technology. More than ever, the workforce will rely on the tertiary education system to equip them for the jobs of tomorrow.

The challenge Australia faces is that our tertiary education system is siloed. Its structure suggests two exclusive pathways, higher education or vocational education and training.

However, to equip people for the changing future, Australia must have a system that enables workers to move seamlessly between higher education and vocational education and training throughout their working lives. Further, this movement must be facilitated in the absence of the barriers that exist today.

Australia's vocational education and training system has its own regulators — one national, one in Victoria and another in Western Australia — and more than a dozen funding models. The higher education system has its own separate regulator and funding model.

This arrangement bewilders students and confronts them with two different loan programs.

For independent tertiary education providers that support more than 71 per cent of students undertaking vocational education and training plus about 10 per cent of students in higher education, different regulators and funding models create a compliance nightmare, and red tape is pervasive.

The Independent Tertiary Education Council of Australia is calling for an integrated and cohesive tertiary education system in which higher education and vocational education and training operate together while still retaining their distinct identities.

This distinction is critical. Such a cohesive tertiary education model is one that supports students throughout their working lives, free from the hassle of navigating the disparate higher education, training and skills sectors.

Key employer stakeholders such as the Business Council of Australia have recognised the need for reform. As with ITECA, they champion an integrated tertiary education system in which the higher education sector and vocational education sector operates as one.

This is significant reform, requiring a substantial structural and cultural shift in Australia's tertiary education system.

It will see us move towards one regulator, one funding model and a student-centric approach to lifelong learning. It will embrace the strengths of each sector.

The higher education sector's role in undertaking world-class research will be retained and its reputation for graduating critical thinkers would be strengthened.

Similarly, the vocational education and training system will continue to excel in providing students of all backgrounds and ages with the skills required to adapt to changing technology.

A fully integrated tertiary education system will enable workers to easily move between vocational education and training and higher education without confronting the complexity of different funding models and access pathways.

For providers, both independent and public, it will mean considerably less red tape, producing cost savings that can be reinvested to provide students and their employers with quality outcomes.

Troy Williams is chief executive of the Independent Tertiary Education Council Australia. He will be a panellist speaking on skills for the jobs of today and tomorrow at the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry Business Leaders' Summit in Parliament House, Canberra, on Wednesday.