



Game: set and match



Australia's so-called skills gap is, in fact, a skills mismatch, and fixing it requires a revised curriculum that links people to the right jobs.

Nicholas Wyman interviewed by James Wells

Rhetoric around youth unemployment must change, an expert has argued. Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show youth unemployment at 12.44 per cent, although it declined in the most recent quarter. Debate on the issue has centred on the notion of a skills gap – education systems failing to cater for industry needs. Nicholas Wyman, chief executive of consulting group the Institute for Workplace Skills and Innovation, has argued this is the wrong way of looking at the problem.

In Australia, there are about 150,000 vacant job positions, alongside high numbers of university graduates without jobs. Therefore, Wyman argues, the conversation should shift from the skills gap to “people without jobs and jobs without people”.

Wyman sat down with *Campus Review* to discuss how new approaches and policies could benefit graduates, employers and education institutions alike.

CR: To begin, can you paint us a picture of youth unemployment in Australia?

NW: Australia is always challenged with youth unemployment because it sits at anywhere from two to three times the national unemployment rate. The national rate is hovering around 6 per cent, but the unemployment rate for 15- to 24-year-olds [is about] 12–13 per cent. In some pockets, such as in Parramatta in Western Sydney, Blacktown and parts of Geelong, it's sitting near 20 per cent.

What's the current conversation around youth unemployment and why do you believe it needs changing?

It's important that we focus on engaging the next generation of workers. University is not the only pathway. Many people bow out of education or bow out of entry-level jobs and apprenticeships because they just don't find the training and the educational experience engaging.

We need to make sure we're training people for the jobs that are available. In Australia, there are about 800,000 people who are unemployed and many of those people are university graduates, yet employers report that there are about 150,000 jobs remaining vacant.

You have to ask yourself the question, 'Well, what's going on with that?' Internationally, it's called the skills gap. I call it 'people without jobs and jobs without people'.

Why do you use this phrase instead of 'skills gap'?

It reflects this labour market mismatch we find ourselves in. My organisation in Australia employs apprentices and then places them with businesses and industries. At any one time, we have about 550 or 600 people working out in the field. As of today, we have 100 unfilled apprenticeships. The jobs are out there but for whatever reason, people are not taking them.



A recent survey from Infosys showed that many young people are pessimistic about their future job prospects. Could that be leading to this gap?

It's tied to the need for education systems to close the skills gap. We have employers who are reporting they can't find people with the skills they need, so [the key question is] what are the skills employers need?

What employers tell me, universally, is they need real-world workplace skills. A lot of people are not going to be able to acquire that in a traditional classroom, and that's why opportunities such as apprenticeships, traineeships, vocational-based education and online learning offer opportunities for people to try career opportunities before jumping in with both feet or taking on expensive four-year university studies only to realise there are no jobs or [the field is] not what makes that person passionate.

Do people developing curriculums need to work more with people from industries so they can cater to what industry needs?

Absolutely. Australia has always been recognised as having high-quality education and training. Learning programs should be based on the Australian Curriculum and qualification framework but we need to order it in a way that achieves the best outcomes for students. Much of it has got to do with how it's delivered.

How do universities and vocational educators need to adjust?

Many universities are realising that people are being employed in different ways. There has been much media [coverage] the last couple of weeks about the changing needs of employers.

People often ask me if university is worth it. Well to get a job at Google, for example, a university degree is not necessarily a

requirement. The head of Penguin Random House in the UK talked recently about the growing evidence that there is no simple correlation between having a degree and future professional success.

So universities need to acknowledge that employers' hiring practices are changing. They need to forge relationships with employers and make sure there is this transition of people from education to the workforce, but also make sure they're training in areas the Australian economy needs. Let's not train for what's popular. Let's train for what's needed and where the jobs are.

How can we raise awareness of alternative pathways to education and employment?

We need to get the word out that alternative pathways are OK. There's a real status quo in Australian education, particularly in high schools, where a lot of careers teachers or careers counsellors are still part-time. Some are working as maybe the gym teacher or the PE teacher and they offer career advice on a Tuesday and Thursday afternoon, so it's not their fault.

The system is set up to be this super highway to a university. But students should be given the opportunity to see what's out there or what opportunities are available.

We need to bring back work experience. We need to push past insurers who say it's challenging to have people going to the workplace anymore [because of safety concerns]. We just have to fight back and say, 'Well I'm sorry, the only way for people to find out what it's like to work in a lot of occupations is to work in the occupations, or at least get experience.'

This goes not only for young people. If people [reading this] need or want career changes, there are opportunities for people to boost and freshen up their skills, no matter where they are in their career journey.

You mentioned insurers. How are they impeding things?

Insurers are terrible for business in Australia. When I was at high school, it was possible to go and do work experience. But so many employers now say: 'We don't do work experience programs because our insurance won't allow us.'

At best, students go stand behind a yellow line and someone says: 'See over there in the distance? They're actually doing this occupation that we're talking about.'

We need to make it much easier for school students to go into the workplace. Occupational health and safety are of prime importance, but there's a way to get people back into the workplaces so they understand what's going on.

What could this way be?

In my ideal workforce scenario or education scenario, we'd have strong partnerships. There'd be an opportunity for people to experience what it's like to work in industries. Websites are great but you've got to consider whether the source of information is credible; here is nothing like getting out and going to a workplace. People are often asking me about career advice and job tips and how you do it. One of the best ways is face-to-face interaction with employers. There is nothing like it. People need to network, become an expert in the industry they want to work in. They need to know that practice makes perfect; people often get knocked back with jobs and then pretty much give up. You've just got to practise with friends and relentlessly follow up. ■