



QUEENSLAND FUTURES INSTITUTE



QLD POLICY LEADERS' FORUM

UNLOCKING THE EDUCATION ECONOMY

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UNLOCKING THE EDUCATION ECONOMY

PANELISTS:



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Snapshot

The 2025 Queensland Futures Institute's, '**Unlocking the Education Economy**', explored the opportunities and challenges facing the sector, and critical new pathways required to reach the full future economic potential. The discussion spanned the need for collaboration and integration between schools, vocational and higher education, as well as industry, in order to deliver the workforce needs for the future, address skill shortages and respond to digital disruption. The Panel identified funding stability and government regulation as key challenges for the sector.

Summary of Panel Comments

- Students are engaging with education in increasingly non-linear ways, blending TAFE and university learning, or entering the workforce mid-study. This highlights the role of education to provide foundational skills as students leave school and enable them to undertake life-long learning across their careers.
- Independent schools face rapid enrolment growth, but rising infrastructure and staffing costs challenge the sector's ability to maintain choice and diversity.
- For K-12 students, mental health, housing insecurity and school refusal are growing pressures that impact student participation and engagement and are a challenge for the sector.
- For TAFEs and universities, funding uncertainty remains a major constraint, limiting long-term planning and partnerships with industry.
- Cross-sector collaboration is essential to meet the University Accord target of lifting tertiary attainment from 60% to 80% by 2050.
- TAFE Queensland is evolving as a full-spectrum provider, delivering VET, school, and higher education offerings, and leading two national TAFE Centres of Excellence which bring together education and industry to improve learning opportunities and outcomes.
- Education also plays a role in ensuring equity and access remains front and centre - with universities like USC supporting large cohorts of first-in-family and low-socioeconomic students.
- Additionally, there is a clear need to better recognise skills and qualifications. For example, Griffith has undertaken initiatives to formally recognise the skills of veterans, mapping prior learning into accredited qualifications at scale.
- A key trend across education is digital disruption and AI. AI literacy and ethics are becoming baseline competencies, with institutions integrating AI into teaching, assessment and workforce readiness.
- Australia's education system is world-class, but excessive regulation and visa constraints risk undermining competitiveness in the global education market.

Panel Comments



Professor Carolyn Evans

- The university sector has faced challenges due to the impact of visa policies and the decline in international student numbers, which has been felt most by suburban and regional universities and have ongoing consequences for universities' capacity to deliver key initiatives.
- In Queensland, the buoyant jobs market has led many students to leave school early and enter the workforce. While this can benefit individuals and the economy in the short term, it may present long-term challenges for the state. There is enormous opportunity where industry and education work together to deliver better outcomes for students and the broader economy. This is true throughout education, training and research.
- Firstly, traditional education can be enhanced through industry partnerships. Working with industry ensures the delivery of relevant skills, particularly in sectors like health and education. This leads to outcomes where students can contribute to innovative engagements which benefit both students as well as industry and organisations.
- For example, Griffith students have worked with Gilmore Space developing satellites, Logan City Council in proactive footpath maintenance initiatives, and Seaworld - co-developing intellectually stimulating puzzles for dolphins.
- Secondly, universities play a role in reskilling and upskilling of employees within industry throughout their careers and business needs evolve. For example, Griffith has worked with Commonwealth Bank, experts, regulators and the Australian Federal Police on programs addressing financial fraud and crime. This training is delivered through executive education and can then be developed through student programs.
- Finally, universities have a role in translating research into impact to drive economic and social prosperity. For example, Griffith University has developed a vaccine for Strep A over decades; now, with commercial potential emerging, we are partnering with pharmaceutical companies to deliver this vaccine, improve health outcomes and boost Queensland's economic prosperity.
- At the end of the day, job outcomes matter - for students and for industry. While there are many hurdles for the sector, there is also a tremendous opportunity to grow and innovate together with industry.



Professor Helen Bartlett

- The University of the Sunshine Coast is still relatively young, approaching its 30th anniversary next year. It has been rapidly growing, doubling its size over the last 10 years, with similar growth anticipated in the next decade, supported significantly by population growth in regions.
- However, this rapid growth brings several challenges. There is significant uncertainty in the higher education sector due to the government-led Accord review process, especially concerning universities' funding model. It could take another two or three years before recommendations and any changes to the funding model are clarified, making annual planning challenging.
- Unlike TAFE, which is state-funded, our funding comes from the Commonwealth, exacerbating the uncertainty.
- Like many industries, skill shortages are another major issue, particularly in specialist IT and technology roles. This is a challenge in urban as well as regional areas.

Panel Comments

- Despite these challenges, there are many opportunities for USC's future and our community-driven mission. To take advantage of these opportunities, USC must be a part of a broader educational ecosystem. This harmonisation with TAFE, for example, has been a focus for the Accord process.
- However, although we are working collaboratively with TAFE and schools, the current regulatory framework and funding model prevent seamless integration.
- Until the funding model is addressed, only piecemeal changes are achievable.
- There's an important role for the Queensland Government to facilitate meaningful collaboration across universities, TAFE and schools, driving economic growth.



Brent Kinnane

- TAFE Queensland is 142 years old, supporting 130,000 students annually across 60 campuses statewide and online, making us a significant contributor to Queensland's educational economy.
- Like universities, funding stability remains a critical challenge, hindering our ability to commit to long-term partnerships with universities and industry when funding sources change regularly.
- Our strategic focus for the future is to continue to establish genuine and mutually beneficial long-term training partnerships with industry. A notable example is our partnership with the BHP Mitsubishi Alliance and CQUniversity through the Queensland Future Skills Partnership, focused on delivering long-term community benefits and investing substantially in skills development. Strong collaborative partnerships between education providers and industry partners will set the standard for successful workforce development for the future.
- Finding the right people to support an organisation is highly beneficial for any business. For TAFE Queensland, industry professionals are among the best educators, bringing industry-current practical skills and knowledge to our students.
- Unlocking opportunities to bridge industry expertise with educational programs therefore represents a significant opportunity.



Chris Mountford

- We have about 230 independent schools across Queensland, educating around 17% of school-aged children, rising to approximately 25% in years 11 and 12.
- We pride ourselves on bringing choice and diversity into education, with schools ranging from long-established grammar schools, faith-based schools, schools for students with disabilities, small and large schools, and everything in between.
- Our sector has seen phenomenal enrolment growth of about 4% compound annual growth, particularly over the past four to five years, which is exceptionally strong compared to historical trends.
- This rapid growth has resulted in many schools reaching full capacity and maintaining lengthy waitlists. For example, one sector leader which oversees 11 schools has a combined waitlist of 4,000 students.
- While this growth presents opportunities, a significant challenge for us is how to service this increasing demand going forward. If we want to ensure families continue to have educational choice in 10, 15 or 25 years, we must figure out how to build more schools.

Panel Comments

- Queensland is expected to have an additional 100,000 school-aged children over the next 20 years, and we need new schools to accommodate this growth.
- The cost of land and construction is a major barrier. Currently, building a school for around 1,000-1,200 K-12 students costs approximately \$100-150 million.
- Another key challenge is ensuring schools have quality staff to deliver education effectively. Maintaining school diversity inherently requires expanding our workforce and resources. We're addressing workforce needs and teacher shortages, but enabling strong school leadership is particularly challenging in the current environment.
- Broader societal issues are increasingly affecting schooling. For example, rising instances of school refusal, social media and online bullying present ongoing challenges beyond school grounds but significantly impact students.
- Housing stress also contributes to educational disengagement, with hundreds of Brisbane families sleeping rough, which is an unstable foundation for children's education.
- Reflecting this issue, specialist assistance schools catered to disengaged students have quadrupled enrolments over the past five years. The rapid growth of this student cohort highlights the need for urgent attention.

The University Accord aims to lift tertiary attainment from 60% to 80% by 2050, highlighting the need for greater collaboration across K–12, TAFE, and higher education. What future initiatives do you see fostering this alignment, and how will they benefit employers and industry?



Professor Helen Bartlett

- We're already engaged in several initiatives, but to reach the national Accord targets, we must enable greater university access for students from equity groups.
- At USC, 66% of our students come from equity groups, including students who are first-in-family, from lower socioeconomic and regional areas, and students with disabilities.
- Future initiatives will involve greater collaboration across the education sector. For example, school students may increasingly take TAFE microcredentials (e.g. in AI) and university units (such as through our Head Start program), earning credits towards future degrees.
- This will see the boundaries between education sectors blur as we move towards a lifelong skilling approach.
- To enable this, a national skills passport is currently being considered. This would standardise qualification terminology and assist employers to clearly understand skills regardless of the education pathway.
- Another opportunity is the co-location of different education sectors. For example, at our Moreton Bay campus at Petrie, now in its fifth year with 5,500 students, we anticipate soon having a TAFE campus nearby. This would enable collaborative opportunities such as advanced manufacturing, shared facilities and co-created educational programs.
- This year, USC is launching a new degree in partnership with Aviation Australia, focused on aircraft maintenance. This is a strong example of effective collaboration with the VET sector to address a critical skills shortage.

Panel Comments

Given TAFE Queensland's statewide presence, what current and future initiatives are you leading to strengthen collaboration across the broader education sector?



Brent Kinnane

- TAFE Queensland is one of the few providers with opportunities across the entire spectrum of the education sector, operating a Year 11 and 12 school at Alex Hills, and offering VET qualifications and bachelor's degree programs.
- Other current initiatives include a TAFE Centre of Excellence for our Health Care and Support, and Clean Energy Batteries sectors. These Centres aren't just physical spaces but a network of collaborations involving universities, TAFEs, private RTOs and schools to determine the best curriculum delivery and student opportunities.
- These centres also enable a significant research component. Within two to three weeks, we expect to finalise funding agreements to support research into accessible delivery models, culturally appropriate training, trainer retention and growth and digital literacy. This initiative offers strong collaboration opportunities with universities, leveraging their extensive research expertise, which benefits the entire education sector.
- Another major initiative we are launching is a partnership with the AI Group Centre for Education and Training and USQ to create a higher-level apprenticeship program that offers a dual electrical qualification.
- The pathway commences with a regular electrical apprenticeship, that includes the Certificate III in Electrotechnology Electrician and leads to an Electrical Mechanic licence, with a Bachelor of Engineering Technology.
- With our new initiative (currently pending TEQSA approval), students can complete both qualifications within six years instead of eight, significantly accelerating their readiness to enter industry and contribute to our state's economy.

What trends are you seeing in the K-12 sector and, and how you link in with the vocational and higher education sectors?



Chris Mountford

- The co-location of schools with other educational providers is an important piece of the puzzle.
- Given the breadth of our sector, there are already numerous relationships between our schools, universities, and VET providers, with a particularly strong uptake of VET programs.
- While the job-ready aspect of education is often emphasised, we must not forget about the broader educational journey. For example, from Prep through to employment, education ensures young people gain foundational and broad-based skills, and allows students to explore their passions, strengths, and eventually identify suitable career paths.
- It is important to understand how students transition from K-12 to other education sectors, and the drivers behind this.
- A current conversation among our schools involves implications of the recent transition to the ATAR model for university entrance. The implementation of the ATAR system has been highly successful in its delivery. However, after a few years, we're now seeing the implications of this transition, particularly around how ATAR influences subject selection in Years 11 and 12. There's concern that this might narrow the focus of student choices based on achieving a specific ATAR outcome.
- Over the next few years, we'll focus on unpacking these implications, ensuring smoother transitions, and delivering outcomes that benefit all students.

Panel Comments

What are some of the initiatives you are working on closely with the VET sector and K-12 schools?



Professor Carolyn Evans

- Despite regulatory and funding model difficulties, there are already many collaborative initiatives between these sectors. However, greater policy stability and a more aligned approach to funding models is needed to support the continued delivery of these initiatives.
- It's important to reconsider the traditional linear hierarchy of education as students increasingly engage in education in more flexible ways. To support this, Griffith encourages nursing students to undertake aged care qualifications through TAFE, gaining recognition for their university study. This enables them to work skilled roles in the aged care sector as they progress through their education, rather than less skilled jobs, addressing critical skill shortages.
- Beyond formal education pathways, we must improve recognising skills and qualifications developed through workplace experience.
- For example, Griffith is undertaking an initiative with the armed forces to support veterans transitioning into civilian life. Veterans acquire exceptional skills through their military careers but often struggle to have these recognised or to transition smoothly into civilian employment. We have undertaken a detailed mapping of military skills to determine how these translate to what is taught through our academic courses, ensuring veterans receive appropriate academic credits.
- While recognition of prior learning already occurs, we must find ways to scale this process and ensure that skills learned in industry are easily recognised, topped up with additional qualifications if necessary. Degrees will always require formal academic components, but we must acknowledge and integrate extensive prior learning effectively.

We are seeing digital disruption across all sectors and economies globally – with a particular focus on AI. What types of skills will our future economy need to deal with these trends, and how are you preparing your students to develop these?



Brent Kinnane

- Many qualification competencies and skillsets will be needed in the new digital environment.
- Autonomous technology skills and opportunities are particularly important; this is already being reflected in the programs offered.
- Maximising the benefits and practical use of AI will be critical for gaining efficiencies and achieving effective workplaces.
- However, general employability skills will remain essential. Engaging effectively in partnerships and teams will remain vital even if it's increasingly occurring in digital environments.
- These employability skills will always be a key part of a future employee's skillset.
- Additionally, cybersecurity is increasingly important. As workplaces become more digital, cybersecurity risks rise significantly.
- At TAFE Queensland, we have excellent cybersecurity programs at the Certificate IV level. Starting this July, we're also launching our first postgraduate program in cybersecurity. These programs will help to prepare students for future employment needs.

Panel Comments



Chris Mountford

- Regarding school students' use of AI, I'm less concerned about their ability, as they'll be native users. The greater challenge lies in how we manage AI within schools effectively.
- At the school level, teachers and schools are thoughtfully exploring how to appropriately communicate and incorporate AI into the classroom.
- On one hand, there's the simplistic view of AI as a modern form of plagiarism, with students getting assignments written by someone else.
- But on the other, AI is a necessary tool that students must learn to use effectively, and schools must actively work through to enable this.
- We have seen schools using AI as a lesson planning tool to help teachers save time, retain their expertise and differentiate support for students more effectively.
- For example, during a recent visit to the United States, I encountered innovative use of AI - a university lecturer digitised videos of himself and learning materials into an AI system, creating a digital personal tutor accessible to students. Although currently a bit clunky, personalised digital tutors could significantly transform education within the next 3, 5 or 10 years.
- The technology is evolving so rapidly that it's challenging to predict the future uses, but overall, it is critical that we are actively engaging with AI – and exploring, experimenting and discussing its appropriate use.



Professor Carolyn Evans

- It remains essential to think about skills needed today - and even more critically, those needed in the future.
- Griffith is introducing our new strategy in about a month, which has been developed after extensive engagement with industry, employers and alumni.
- A recurring theme through this engagement was the desire for students who are not only capable, confident and competent, but also ethical in their use of AI.
- We found that employers expect that younger employees will teach older generations how to competently use AI tools, so ignoring AI isn't an option.
- Griffith already creatively incorporates engagement with AI into our assessments. For example, in our fine arts degree, students write reflections on a painting, then have ChatGPT do the same, comparing both outputs to explore differences in personal experience versus AI-generated content.
- This reflects the need to fundamentally rethink and improve assessment approaches. Traditional essays (e.g., "arguments for and against") were never ideal, and are now completely inadequate given they can easily be AI-generated.
- Developing personal, human-focused skills alongside technical abilities will be critical in the age of AI. Future tools, including AI, will likely diagnose many medical conditions more effectively than most specialists. However, patients will still want a human - with empathy, cultural understanding and compassion - to deliver difficult news and provide support.
- Recognising this, we now select medical students not only on high ATAR scores or medical test results, but also through interviews and ensuring consistent human engagement throughout their education.

Panel Comments



Professor Helen Bartlett

- Industry is going to need everyone to have basic AI literacy. As a university, we have a responsibility to ensure our students develop this literacy. But this is a challenge given many of our staff are still working to catch up in a fast-moving landscape.
- Industry also requires technical skills in areas like machine learning, data engineering, managing complex datasets and cloud computing. Not all students will need this deep specialisation, but we do need to prepare students for varying levels of AI competencies.
- USC is currently developing initiatives to provide practical experiences to support these skills, including AI labs to support experimentation in all subjects, as well as hackathons that bring together students and industry to share ideas and learn collaboratively.
- A critical area for further work is around AI policy and ethics. Students need to learn when and how to use AI appropriately, and how to ensure ethical governance of these tools.
- There are also opportunities in multidisciplinary approaches – for example, by developing capstone projects involving AI in law, business, health, and other sectors.
- In addition to these initiatives, it is also important to ensure students develop and retain critical thinking skills, so they don't become overly reliant on AI.
- We shouldn't become too reactive by restricting students' AI use - it's already being used, so universities must help students to use it critically and appropriately.

Audience Questions

Could greater diversity and less government regulation in the university sector unlock more of Australia's educational potential? Is there room for new institutional players beyond the current 39 highly regulated universities?



Professor Carolyn Evans

- The role of government is clear when looking at institutions like Harvard – which receives \$9.5 billion, with 67% of its income from the US government. However, we must be cautious not to overplay comparisons to other systems.
- Glyn Davis, former Vice-Chancellor of Griffith and Melbourne universities, argued in his book that Australia's 39 universities are too similar. In comparison in the US, diversity exists across two-year colleges, liberal arts colleges, and other institutions.
- However, applying that US model directly to Australia overlooks key structural differences. For example, TAFEs now have the capacity to grant degrees. This indicates there is more diversity in Australian education than it may appear, particularly when comparing regional universities with large metropolitan research institutions. Even if universities are technically similar, their roles and community impact can be very different.
- The risk of government intervention inherently creates risk aversion. This risk aversion, in addition to financial constraints, inhibits our ability for creativity and to innovation, preventing the sector from seizing opportunities with AI, or collaborating boldly with community and government.
- Both political parties are promising more university regulation in the upcoming election, and while this may address some political objectives, it will also prevent universities and education from unlocking the true potential for the broader economy.

Education is a global game, particularly in higher education. Which countries are leading in university and vocational models, and what could Australia learn from them to stay internationally competitive?



Brent Kinnane

- There are many places that deliver vocational education and training very well. For example, the German apprenticeship system is world-renowned and highly regarded within the sector.
- Australia is among the best in the world at delivering educational experiences – and international students have fantastic opportunities to come to Queensland for education.
- However, government regulation has significant impacts for the sector. Recent decisions, such as around visa processing, have greatly impacted international student numbers.



Professor Helen Bartlett

- Australia has a high-quality, globally leading higher education system. This drives the strong international student flows, even amidst challenges like visa issues and bipartisan plans to reduce international student numbers.
- While we might express frustration about regulatory intervention, these checks and balances have contributed to building a high-quality education system.
- That said, the global trend of increasing intervention in the traditional domain of universities is concerning. We must still minimise unnecessary intervention. Institutions should not be required to self-censor; we must preserve their capability to inspire and unlock learning, creativity and knowledge creation.

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