FED: Skills too driven by student choice: Evans

SYDNEY, Oct 3 AAP - Students are given too much choice in what they want to study, leaving Australia with a shortage of in-demand skilled workers, the federal tertiary education minister says.

Senator Chris Evans says universities are focused on responding to student demand rather than demand from employers.

"We've got a lot of work to do to be more responsive to skills emerging in the economy," Senator Evans told The Future of Work conference in Sydney on Wednesday.

"I think the old supply-driven model is slow to react, it's too driven by student choices.

"We've got lots of students wanting to do gaming design and no-one wanting to do IT or computing now, but we've got thousands of jobs in IT and computing, and about three in game design and lots of graduates."

While the senator acknowledged that student choice was one of the "great things about democracy", the focus needed to shift to employers.

Senator Evans also questioned the usefulness of traditional teaching methods at university, saying their value was being tested by the rise of the web-based education.

"Being lectured to is an old mode of delivery," he said.

"What does the university academic do in Australia if the students have access to the best content in the world through the internet?"

"Unis have had to question how they add value. Really, the nature of what they do is undergoing huge transformation."

He added that he believes young people no longer wanted certainty or security from employment.

"They're used to contracts, be it on their phone, their parents mightn't stay married for nearly as long as they used to," he said.

"The whole world moves much faster for them, I don't think they're as focused on security."
Free online study is ‘game changing’

Tertiary Education Minister Chris Evans has questioned whether the government should keep funding universities’ building programs as higher education rapidly moves online.

Senator Evans told a Sydney industry skills conference yesterday that moves by top United States universities to make courses available for free online was “game changing” and would have a big impact on Australian universities.

US universities are leading the development of so-called MOOCs – massive open online courses – which offer high-quality courses from top academics online for free.

Since the first MOOC appeared late last year, universities have been scrambling to understand what it means for them when the best courses in the world are available at no cost.

“Universities are having to question how they add value, whether the nature of what they do is undergoing huge transformation,” Senator Evans told The Future of Work conference.

“Why would we be funding all these buildings when people aren’t learning in that way any more? Why would we be building lecture halls? So what should we be investing in?” he said.

He said there were also implications for university staff if students had access to the best content in the world through the internet.

He made it clear that it was not only the appearance of MOOCs that were driving change in higher education, but also use of online technology, such as posting course materials online and replacing textbooks with websites.

Senator Evans will chair a conference later this month at the University of Canberra to discuss the implications of online education.

The University of Melbourne will offer its first free online courses next year. The University of Queensland is also developing MOOC courses. Two other leading Australian universities, the Australian National University and the University of Sydney, have no plans to offer free courses online.

In the US, top universities including Stanford, Harvard, MIT and Berkeley either have, or are planning to, put courses online for free, partly for promotional reasons. Some universities are also offering students credit for MOOC courses.

Dr Michael Keating, a fellow at the ANU, presented modelling under way that will determine government spending on training. Scenarios included a terms of trade shock to the labour market and natural and financial crises in Asia.
Victories in divisions

Changes to departments a good sign

The small business lobby is claiming major victories with the establishment of divisions catering to the sector in two Federal Government departments.

The Treasury and Industry, Innovation Science, Research and Tertiary Education departments will have divisions to deal with small business issues.

Council of Small Business of Australia executive director Peter Strong said the commitment, which was disclosed during briefings and in a letter from Treasury, was a sign the sector was being taken seriously.

Mr Strong said the inclusion of the Small Business Minister into cabinet and the soon-to-be-appointed Small Business Commissioner were big wins for the small end of town.

“We have been saying for a long time that small business is the engine room of the economy but now we feel as if we are starting to cut through,” Mr Strong said.

The creation of divisions within the departments was an indication that their concerns were being heard, he said. The letter from Treasury announcing the establishment of the division, said “the small business tax division will enhance our ability to understand and respond to the diverse set of issues facing this sector”.

The innovation division brings all the support and branches involved in small business under one roof.

“It includes a branch that looks at small business engagement which is a step forward because we have always said communication is as important as policy,” he said.

The small business commissioner is expected to be announced by the end of the month and will take up the job early in January.

Mr Strong said small businesses were still unhappy at having to administer the paid parental leave and superannuation schemes.
Skills boost for trainees

THE Federal Government will spend an extra $18 million over five years on training in the Territory under a new agreement.

Federal Skills Minister Senator Chris Evans said that the Territory plan was the first to be approved under the $1.75 billion national program.

NT Territory Employment and Training Minister Peter Chandler said it would mean more training places and opportunities for employment.
Unis climb up global rankings

JILL ROWBOTHAM

INCREASED research investment and improved collaboration with Asia is driving Australian universities’ strong performance in the latest global league table published today, according to commentators.

The University of Melbourne confirmed its elite status, topping the local league table and moving into the world’s top 30.

It is up nine places from last year, to number 28, moving clear of its nearest rival, the Australian National University on 37.

The University of NSW and Monash University moved into the top 100, bringing Australia’s tally there to six. National representation in the top 200 has been boosted to eight with the addition of the University of Adelaide.

Australia has two fewer institutions in the top 400 compared to last year’s 21. Melbourne’s acting vice-chancellor, provost Margaret Sheil, said the result put the institution “right up there with the finest universities in the world, which is where we want to be”.

“The biggest challenge we have is maintaining this,” Professor Sheil said. “We are moving into a very difficult fiscal environment with this government.”

But earlier federal government investments in infrastructure had in turn “allowed us to invest in the kind of infrastructure you need to keep world-class researchers together” and made the university system “a massive international success story”.

Times Higher Education is the final of three annual global rankings the sector watches: the Academic Ranking of World Universities and QS rankings were published in the past six weeks.

“I suspect it’s the first signs of a more competitive, more concentrated research funding environment,” rankings editor Phil Baty said of the Australian result, crediting the first Excellence in Research for Australia audit, published in 2011.

He said Australia also seemed to be capitalising on its proximity to the Asia-Pacific region via research partnerships in China, Hong Kong and Singapore.

Simon Marginson, an editorial board member of Times Higher Education, and professor in Melbourne’s Centre for the Study of Higher Education, said research performance was “very public-investment-dependent”.

“If the Australians are doing better that’s largely why,” Professor Marginson said. This was partly a legacy of the surge in income from international students in 2008-10.

View the full global rankings www.theaustralian.com.au
Student demand system ‘failing’

TERTIARY Education Minister Chris Evans says the government’s $10 billion-a-year student-demand-driven system of allocating places is not working because students have too much choice.

In what amounts to an about-face, Senator Evans told a Future of Work Conference in Sydney yesterday that the system was too driven by student choices.

“We’ve got lots of students wanting to do gaming design and no one wanting to do IT or computing now, but we’ve got thousands of jobs in IT and computing, and about three in game design and lots of graduates.”

The new student-demand-driven system was introduced earlier this year.

In January, Senator Evans crowed about the massive increase in university offers, saying the government was producing qualifications necessary for the knowledge economy.

“We are opening the doors of our universities and giving more eligible Australians, from all regions and backgrounds, the skills they need to take advantage of the high-skilled, high-paid jobs of the future,” he said.

But yesterday Senator Evans said universities were too focused on meeting student demand rather than meeting the needs of employers.

His comments came as Greg Craven, vice-chancellor of the Australian Catholic University, said at the National Press Club yesterday: “So often what we have is governments coming to us and saying: will you please produce more science and maths graduates so they can go and teach into our schools, and you’re letting the side down by not doing it.

“I suggested to one state minister that if he is prepared to kidnap budding maths and science students and bring them to me, I will teach them.”

Professor Craven said an independent body that policed university admissions could discourage the overuse of school-based ranking scores.

He said Australia could revive a 1940s approach to managing enrolments by creating an “autonomous statutory body in the nature of a Universities Commission” to assess university admissions processes. He said such a body could encourage different types of selection mechanisms such as aptitude tests, interviews, portfolios, bonuses for disadvantage “and a ban on baseball caps worn backwards”.

It would discourage the use of Australian Tertiary Admission Rank scores as a default gatekeeper for university enrolments, and increasingly for professions such as teaching — an approach Professor Craven likened to selecting the Australian cricket team on school batting averages instead of first-class performances.

He said the new universities commission would be “a one-stop body, independent of government but attached to government”, made up of academics, businesspeople and public policy experts.

Universities have come under fire for lowering ATAR cut-offs to attract more students, after the federal government removed limits on the number of undergraduates they could take.

However, Professor Craven said high school exams had become “a general-purpose certification of education” and were no longer designed for university selection.
Top marks for education pages

**THE Australian's Higher Education section has picked up its third award in a month for quality journalism.**

The editor of the Higher Education section, Julie Hare, was presented yesterday with the award for excellence in professional commentary from the International Education Association of Australia at its annual conference in Melbourne.

In presenting the award, IEAA president-elect Helen Zimmerman said: "Under Julie’s editorial direction, The Australian has become the leading source of news for international education (and) consistently provides timely and insightful analysis of social issues, government policy and regulatory changes."

In the past three weeks, the higher education team won an award for its coverage of international students from the Migration Institute of Australia and John Ross collected an award for journalism from the Australian Deans of Education.