

WESTERN SYDNEY
UNIVERSITY



GREEN PAPER: WORK

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BACKGROUND

Predictions of the future of work often dwell on the disruptive power of digital technologies and automation, forecasting job losses in relatively unskilled occupations and growth in jobs requiring more ‘human’ attributes like creativity, problem-solving and collaborative skills.

But we know that the future of work will not roll out seamlessly and globally. The future arrives faster in some places than in others, and managing change of this magnitude and complexity requires international governance and networks to smooth the transition.

In August 2017, the International Labour Organisation launched the Global Commission on the Future of Work. The Commission brings together thinkers and practitioners from around the world to address work-related challenges resulting from changes in technology, demography, climate change and globalisation. Their goal is to examine work through the lens of social justice. They are seeking solutions beneficial to the broadest range of people, with a view to achieving inclusive and sustainable economic growth for developed and developing countries.

Efforts to understand global changes in work need to be examined alongside local labour market histories and characteristics. The NSW Government’s Intergenerational Report forecasts an increase in portfolio careers – where workers hold multiple part-time or fixed-term jobs with multiple employers – along with telecommuting and remote working. Each of these developments will challenge existing social structures, requiring employers and employees to find new ways to facilitate productive work relationships.

The uneven distribution of change, and the intersection of social and economic movements around work, point to the need for the future of work to be understood in local detail that grounds the crystal ball gazing of futurists. This green paper is a start in addressing this need, outlining Western Sydney’s labour force characteristics, changing education pathways, and research trajectories.

WESTERN SYDNEY

Australia's future of work challenge will be won or lost in Western Sydney. No other region faces the same size or complexity in finding appropriate jobs for its resident workers. Western Sydney is the nation's fastest growing labour market, yet the region has a chronic shortage of local jobs: Western Sydney workers outnumber the region's jobs by 150,000. By 2036 – at present growth rates – the region faces a jobs deficit of 210,000.

The region also faces a major economic transformation. Western Sydney's rise as a major suburban region in the post-war decades was accompanied by successful jobs decentralisation programs that shifted manufacturing industries away from Sydney's inner south and inner west. At the 1971 census 36.4% of the workforce in the Bankstown Local Government Area (LGA) was employed in the manufacturing sector. For Parramatta LGA the proportion was 33.9%, Fairfield LGA 38.3% and Blacktown LGA 35.4%. By the 2011 census the proportion of workers in the manufacturing sector fell dramatically, with Bankstown LGA recording 11.8%, Parramatta LGA 8.6%, Fairfield LGA 17.8% and Blacktown LGA 12.7%.

The shift in employment away from manufacturing in Western Sydney will continue. Meanwhile, employment in the region's other major post-war employment sector, retailing, has plateaued, and many predict numbers of retailing workers in the region will fall as technological innovation and changed shopping patterns erode retailing's traditional employment concentrations.

Employment growth is, however, occurring in sectors directly serving Western Sydney's population growth. The construction sector is a major jobs provider associated with new dwellings and infrastructure investments. Jobs in health, personal services, and education and training are likewise growing in response to population growth. A high proportion of these services jobs involve workers with higher education and training – teaching and nursing being prominent examples – although many are also lowly paid unskilled jobs.

The region has rising levels of tertiary education, with the number of degreed workers residing in Western Sydney increasing by around 10,000 each year, most of whom join Western Sydney's daily commuting outflow. Western Sydney's major jobs deficit is in the professional and business services sectors. Workers in these sectors are the main long distance commuters from Western Sydney to CBD-located employment.

The surge in demand for jobs by degree holders from Western Sydney cannot be underestimated. Data for the four case study LGAs described above for manufacturing show how dramatically the degreeed part of the labour force in Western Sydney has changed. For Bankstown LGA the number of tertiary degree holders has climbed from just 819 in 1971 to 18,976 in 2011. For Parramatta LGA the climb is from 1,136 to 50,616, for Fairfield LGA from 364 to 13,830 and for Blacktown from 539 to 39,401.

The sheer size of the number of degree holders exposes the myth of Western Sydney as a blue collar industrial region. Household income data from the 2016 census confirms Western Sydney as typifying middle-class Australia. The problem, though, is a deficiency in middle-class, professional jobs.

Finally, the Western Sydney labour market is Australia's stand-out entry point for new migrant workers. At the 2016 census 78,343 people who were living in the old Bankstown LGA were born overseas, with 14% of these arriving in Australia since 2011. For Parramatta LGA the equivalent figures were 112,198 and 28%, for Fairfield LGA 107,147 and 16%, and for Blacktown LGA 136,285 and 17%. Western Sydney has been the nation's major recipient of new migrants for at least seven decades, meaning the region's economy is looked to as the major provider of jobs and income for this group. This involves workers from across the skills spectrum. While international in-migration generates net benefits for the nation's economy, it increases the demand for jobs in Western Sydney.

EDUCATION

Changing social, cultural and economic conditions, globally and regionally, demand significant changes to all levels of Australia's education system. It is likely that young people in Western Sydney today will emerge to a lifetime of work that will be more varied than the one for which they were prepared. The rate of career change alone is anticipated to far exceed current levels.

The challenge for education is clear: the future of work will need to be linked to the future of learning. Young Australians will need to not only acquire foundation and technical skills, but be able to use these in increasingly enterprising and creative ways and apply them in diverse environments. Traditional education and training institutions will be required to transform their approaches well before 2030 to become the smart learning partners of these lifelong learners.

Universities can support the development of quality employment in the region not only through labour force development, but through partnerships with industry and the local community to provide authentic educational opportunities for students. One of the challenges for universities and the communities they serve is to grow more genuine curriculum partnerships that exemplify deep engagement and reciprocity.

But the education solutions demanded by future workplaces are unlikely to be realised by any single type of educational provider. The varied nature of the knowledge, skill, attitudes, and dispositions determining the capabilities required to thrive in the future make a unilateral approach impossible. Universities – like all other entities in the education space – need to collaborate with industry, community and other providers at all levels to deliver the complex capabilities required.

People will increasingly need to return to learning many times during their varied careers. Indeed, university learning might not precede a first career – it might follow it. Entry pathways to university will become more personalised, based on technologically-enabled records of authentic personal learning and capability rather than generic test scores derived from formal education. The increasing recognition that learning happens everywhere enhances the possibility of entering university and moving directly to capability-based assessment for a qualification on the basis of that learning. Universities' have a unique contribution to make, including contesting some of the many assumptions about the future of work we face as a society. It is important to remember that there are many futures possible depending on the society we become. A significant challenge for education is to not simply react to the changes emerging in the future of work, but to help shape that future for our society.

RESEARCH

Research into the future of work at Western Sydney University examines local and regional labour markets, in particular, the barriers to and opportunities for sustaining local and regional employment.

A key question the University's research seeks to answer is how business, government and community stakeholders support local employment and the renewal of regional economies.

To answer this question it is necessary to understand the processes and factors that shape the experiences of local employers and resident communities, including young people, and how growing labour market uncertainty affects these experiences. Western's researchers have explored the benefits of mapping and matching areas of youth unemployment with employer reported skill shortages, and the contribution of social partnerships to that alignment.

The University's future research in this area will investigate the unique transport and sustainability challenges facing the Western Sydney workforce. The research will evaluate the spatial distribution of residential and business developments in Western Sydney and establish trends in, and forecasts for, employment, commuting patterns, and land use in Western Sydney. Using institutional labour market theory, the research will explore the impact of transport opportunities and constraints on labour market imbalances, particularly imbalances that occur in the labour markets for casual work, work occurring in non-standard hours, for workers with caring responsibilities, and those engaged in vocational education and training.

Western's research also looks inside businesses, focusing on employment relationships and examining the way individuals, groups, organisations and institutions shape these relationships. This research encompasses policies, structures and workplace practices to support diverse workforces inclusive of workers with family responsibilities, and analyses the scope and quality of flexible work practices and workplace leadership. Our research also examines work health and safety matters in contemporary workplaces, including the use of data to help identify how injuries and illnesses in the work environment can be prevented.

CATALYSTS

The idea of a linear and stable career narrative has or is coming to an end. This ending is giving way to new beginnings in the way we engage, interact and participate socially, economically, culturally and politically in society. As an important signifier of identity, work is at the centre of this change. The intensity of change is particularly pronounced in regions like Western Sydney, where an overlay of complex economic transformation and population growth complicates already challenging shifts in work. How we collectively address these issues today will determine much of the shape of work over the coming decades across Western Sydney. And how we work will directly influence our wellbeing and prosperity as a region well beyond that timeframe.

What will be distinct and common about the future of work in Western Sydney compared to other domestic and international settings?

How do we contend with the social and economic imbalances of the future of work across Western Sydney?

Are we designing and realising urban environments, infrastructure and work settings that support innovations and changes in work?

How can the region – government, industry, the community and educational providers – best prepare for shifting job concentrations and major employment demand fluctuations?

Is policy and educational reform attuned to ‘real-world’ work challenges and emerging work patterns?