

## Sarah Box



Sarah Box - a New Zealand citizen - has been working as an Economist in the OECD Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry since early 2007. She has been analysing issues around the international mobility of highly skilled people, as well as contributing to work on public research organisations and the wider OECD Innovation Strategy project. Prior to joining the OECD, Sarah started her career as an Analyst at the New Zealand Treasury, where she undertook research on a diverse range of topics related to economic performance, to feed into policy development. She then moved to providing policy advice on telecommunications and regional, industry and economic development. Following this, Sarah moved to Australia to work as a Senior Research Economist for the Australian Government Productivity Commission, where she co-authored analytical reports providing policy advice on microeconomic issues. She holds Master of Commerce and Bachelor of Commerce (Honours) degrees in economics from the University of Auckland.

### **In your view, what is the most probable or desirable future scenario regarding innovation and international mobility in higher education?**

From the perspective of economic growth and innovation, a desirable future scenario regarding international mobility in higher education is one where students and staff have the opportunity and ability to move freely between higher education institutions and also between higher education institutions and firms or other research organisations. Mobility of highly educated and skilled people is one of the main methods by which knowledge is diffused, thus supporting the circulation of new ideas and the development of new capabilities.

### **In your opinion, what is or should be the most important objective for higher education in the future? Why?**

Higher education must augment the skills people learn in their foundation years of schooling so as to produce a workforce that not only has specialised expertise relating to particular fields but also has the "soft skills" (such as problem solving and teamwork) and the adaptability and change management skills to cope with our fast-paced and increasingly globalised and connected environment.

### **What do you consider to be the main future challenge(s) for higher education systems? Why?**

We tend to demand a lot from our higher education institutions - to provide skilled people, to advance knowledge, to help us meet social goals of equity and inclusion... I see the balancing of these objectives as a major challenge - different strategies are required for each of these objectives, as well as different measures of success and progress. In addition, the outcomes are seen in the long-term - it is hard to know if you have "got it right". This challenge can only grow stronger as economies' demands for skilled people increase and processes of innovation and knowledge creation become ever more rapid.

**In your opinion, what would be the worst, but possible, way to tackle these future challenges? Why?**

With so many uncertainties, the worst approach would be an inflexible, rules- or numerically-based strategy that attempts to place "one-size-fits-all" demands on institutions as regards their methods of teaching, research approaches and student selection. Top-down plans are likely to misjudge the specific needs of different groups (be they regions, communities, industries...) and are hard to change. Hopefully, however, the likelihood of this is small. Page | 13

**What do you consider to be the best possible way to tackle the above mentioned future challenges? Why?**

The best way to tackle the challenge of "balance" is to maintain institutional openness (links with industry, communities etc, as well as openness to change), flexibility (so that different institutions can offer different things to different people) and accountability (so that the impacts of decisions about funding, research etc are fed back into the original decision making process). Of course, diversity can carry the risk of incoherence, and the risk of missing an important target. There are also many unknowns about how economies and societies will evolve. But I suspect higher education institutions are up to the challenge!