

# Shortfall in research workforce

## Opinion

Vicki Thomson

When the three independents presented the Prime Minister with a list of the portfolio areas on which they wished to receive high-level briefings to assist them in determining who should form government, industry, innovation, science and research did not feature.

Should we be surprised?

Ask the average person on the street if they ever consider that ensuring Australia has enough researchers is an important issue and you'd be hard pressed to find many who would say yes.

But ask if they want Australia to be at the forefront of research on brain, breast and prostate cancer, clean coal, information technology, and engineering and you might just get some enthusiastic responses.

It seems the community in general – and perhaps our



Good R&D keeps Australia globally competitive.

Photo: LOUISE KENNERLEY

politicians – do not make the connection between the critical necessity of having researchers and the delivery of vital research and innovation within Australia.

For the university sector, an even

more important question is: "How much do our politicians understand that we must have available quality researchers instead of the skills shortage we are about to face within two years?"

The government has to ask if we want to have a strong economy, companies that are competitive in a globalised market, and a well educated and productive workforce.

While the general consensus would obviously be yes, the fact remains that having an adequate supply of research-trained people is the key to making it happen. And we do not have the supply required.

The problem is that it's not an attention-grabbing issue. And, as we've seen, it's not on Bob Katter, Tony Windsor or Rob Oakeshott's list as a deciding issue as they precariously negotiate their terms of engagement with the major political parties.

But they should consider this – better economic and social outcomes for Australia can only be achieved by building our intellectual capacity, and an ongoing supply of quality researchers is essential to driving that activity.

By way of example, an Access

# should sound alarms

Economics (2008) estimation of the value of health research and development in Australia, measured by the impact on mortality rates, found that 2.5 per cent of all potential future gains in wellbeing can be directly attributed to R&D.

Further, the study estimated that the net benefit of health R&D over the period 1992 to 2005 was \$29.5 billion.

The fact is, the majority of this research occurs in our universities, and it requires a research workforce. It's not rocket science.

Recent modelling undertaken for government shows that even at a base economic growth, Australia is facing a shortfall of researchers by 2012. If we aim for high economic growth, or the innovation economy to which we aspire, the shortfall becomes even more pronounced.

Despite this problem and the importance of research-trained individuals to Australia, action to address the issue has generally been slow in coming. It's not that both

parties don't recognise its value and importance. As Industry Minister Kim Carr noted in the foreword to *Powering Ideas*, "Increasing our capacity to create new knowledge and find new ways of doing business is the key to building a modern economy based on advanced skills and technologies. It is the key to success in this, the global century."

Likewise, Liberal spokeswoman Sophie Mirabella has said the Coalition supports innovation in Australia, and is determined "to overcome some of the challenges that face us in the future".

It's simply that there are other issues that have more traction in the public mind and which get more attention. As the Business Council of Australia's president Graham Bradley observed recently, "there [is] a temptation before elections to pitch to perceived short-term self-interest rather than long-term national interest".

But our policymakers cannot

afford to ignore the importance of a strong research-trained workforce and they must act with some speed to address the issue.

Clear and consistent policy designed to fund and support early career researchers and research graduates is critical to retaining and developing the nation's research workforce.

Even if universities were to be given funding to teach additional PhD students tomorrow, it would take until 2015 for those students to complete their training and enter their "early career researcher" stage. With researcher shortages already predicted by 2012, delay is not something we can afford.

An immediate and concerted effort by all stakeholders must take place if Australia is to build the strong innovation system required to support our economy as a whole.

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