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Cuts to Future Fellowships will cost more than just jobs

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Cuts to Future Fellowships will cost more than just jobs

Abstract

Christopher Pyne's proposed cuts to the Future Fellowships program will have devastating ripple effects well beyond those researchers who will miss out on research funding. The Australian Research Council's Future Fellowship scheme has succeeded precisely because it has been Australia's most significant systematic investment of funds in people. People are the human resource backbone for the Australian research innovation system, and Future Fellowships underwrite highly performing researchers to pursue research with intensity. Less obviously, but no less significant, the scheme has sparked diverse flow-on benefits. Cutting the scheme will deny researchers funding, immediately threatening jobs and constraining Australia's development of new knowledge, techniques and technologies. But it will also prevent the nation from enjoying a fuller suite of future benefits. What are some of the positive knock-on effects of Future Fellowship funding?

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THE CONVERSATION

Cuts to Future Fellowships will cost more than just jobs

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Education Minister Christopher Pyne is waving goodbye to the Future Fellowships scheme and it could cost Australian research dearly. Mick Tsikas/AAP

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Cutting the scheme will deny researchers funding, immediately threatening jobs and constraining Australia's development of new knowledge, techniques and technologies. But it will also prevent the nation from enjoying a fuller suite of future benefits.

What are some of the positive knock-on effects of Future Fellowship funding?

Future leaders

The Future Fellowship scheme has unquestionably unearthed future research leaders. Much is written about the importance of investing in early career researchers, with good reason. They are our collective intellectual and scientific future.

At the other end of the spectrum, outstanding senior established researchers are typically already better resourced. They run research centres and institutes, often enjoying research-only contracts from their universities.

The Future Fellowship scheme has been crucial because it fills a key career gap when Australia typically loses talent overseas. Future Fellowships enable mid-career people with the potential, but not yet the resources, to lead research centres, to develop leadership skills independently of established superstars in their field.

And it keeps talented researchers here in Australia. A recent review of the scheme revealed that 98% of all recipients expected to remain at their host institution beyond the term of their fellowship.

I was lucky enough to secure a Future Fellowship from the inaugural round in 2009, and it

proved pivotal to my career. Beyond enhancing my research productivity, it put me “on the radar” of the university senior executive. Leadership opportunities and higher-level committee work followed.

Similar experiences abound across the country. Take for example Professor Andrew Francis, a Future Fellowship recipient in mathematics at the University of Western Sydney. He describes his Fellowship experience as “transformative”. It enabled four years of focused research and resources to support local and international collaborations.

But just as importantly, it transformed the institutional space around him. Andrew – and the whole of mathematics – became more visible to university management, inviting further leadership opportunities. UWS created a Centre for Research in Mathematics and Andrew is now Director, building a lively and productive research culture.

Cutting the Future Fellowship scheme will deny future research leaders such funding, visibility and credibility.

Critical mass

Perhaps the most resounding, if unheralded, success of Future Fellowship scheme has been its job multiplier effect. The original ambitious goal was to create 1,000 jobs by funding 200 Future Fellowships per year for five years. The real number of jobs created is without doubt much larger than this – more like 3,000 to 5,000.

Extra critical mass has been vital. This is because a quintessential dilemma is that Australian research struggles to compete with larger American, European and increasingly, Chinese research powerhouses. Good research needs critical mass. And we need our universities to fuel new inventions, to put Australia at the forefront of global thinking, lest we fall behind and become a net importer of expertise.

So when Federal dollars go into the research sector, it is critical that they deliver more than their initial injection of funding — creating a multiplier effect. Future Fellowships do this in a very clever way. By releasing researchers from regular teaching duties, the scheme automatically triggers universities to create new positions to cover existing classroom loads.

Additional project funding leverages extra support, infrastructure and facilities from host institutions. This in turn expands capacity and creates even more jobs for technical support officers and lab managers.

When our school won two Future Fellowships back in 2009, we immediately advertised two additional “back-fill” positions, funded by the university. Both of the individuals hired proved irreplaceable, not just for teaching but for research productivity – they published prodigiously and attracted new external funding. In time, “back-fill” contracts became continuing positions – an enduring legacy.

In Andrew Francis’ case, two postdocs were appointed with matching funds (one an eminent Hungarian scholar, the other a brilliant ex-pat who had been working previously in the UK), and high calibre PhDs were recruited. A single Future Fellowship led directly to a team of six.

Then, on top of that visibility and success, further funding for another two postdocs. For every Future Fellowship awarded, the university sector witnesses job multipliers for highly educated and skilled workers, and society as a whole benefits from extra flow-on jobs.

Short term politics, long term consequences

Cutting the Future Fellowship scheme will reopen a gaping hole in the mid-career stage, risking loss of the best researchers. It will also trigger a flow-on contraction in the sector — a

kind of reverse multiplier effect. Future opportunities for jobs, credibility and capacity will evaporate, and we may yet again lose the best brains to northern hemisphere universities.

Comparing the situation to Pyne's previous threat of cuts to NCRIS, the nation's future as a global innovator needs both the facilities *and* people.

The Future Fellowship scheme is simply too effective a pipeline for future research leaders to be held as ransom for an unpopular deregulation agenda.