

Internships promise to boost collaboration

JOHN ROSS THE AUSTRALIAN 8:08PM JUNE 27, 2016

The Coalition's election promise to boost PhD internships will add to the "unstoppable" momentum for more collaboration between universities and industry, according to the organisation set to manage the extra funding.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced on Sunday that a re-elected Coalition government would spend \$28.2 million to help the Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute expand its PhD internships program nationally, with a particular focus on women researchers.

AMSI Director Geoff Prince said that if realised, the commitment would "massively expand" the program and its impact by bankrolling 1400 internships over four years.

This would add pressure on universities to add an optional internship component to PhDs, overcoming the "enrolment limbo" many students found themselves in after submitting their theses.

"They could continue enrolled fulltime as they took the internship component of their PhD for credit," Professor Prince said. "At the moment, they're not eligible for scholarships and various other things."

Now that the government had endorsed the program, universities would be "very keen" to participate — especially with new measures of research activity being put in place.

This would boost support for a formalised internship component, an idea already embraced by peak bodies and university executives but resisted somewhat at the managerial level.

Professor Prince said it would take longer for the commercial world to engage. But he said establishing internships as for-credit components would clear up grey areas around industrial conditions and taxation.

"It would solve a lot of problems around whether internships are an educational thing or not. If the program is taken for credit, almost all problems go away."

He said the government was pulling "clear" policy and funding levers to increase universities' collaboration outside academia, and ultimately, the election outcome would not change that. "This increasing engagement between universities and the commercial sector is unstoppable.

"Internship programs like these help the universities meet their key performance indicators and improve their national and international rankings. Universities move pretty fast on these things. They see their international and national rankings as being absolutely fundamental to their operations, so they'll do whatever they need to make sure they're performing according to these measures."

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