

\$6bn fund urged for science infrastructure

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A 10-year, \$6.6 billion fund to cover the costs of research and science infrastructure would set the country on the path to meet the agile, digital, progressive economy imagined by Malcolm Turnbull, a government report will recommend.

The report, commissioned last October by former education minister Christopher Pyne, says present funding arrangements for research infrastructure are a shambles. It says a lack of co-ordination, long-term funding stability and strategic vision is undermining the country's research endeavours.

"The case for investing in research infrastructure is strong. Excellent research requires excellent research infrastructure," the executive summary of the report, seen by the HES, says.

The report suggests the government contribute \$3.7bn into an initial funding pool, which would return \$1.5bn in earnings across a 10-year period and would be topped up with \$1.4bn from other sources, such as state governments, international research consortiums, universities and business.

"Malcolm Turnbull in his first speech to parliament set out our future based on technology, science and new industries. Without world-class infrastructure and funding certainty we are not going to get the results that we need," Phil Clark, the report's lead author, told the HES.

The report recommends the government expand the focus of its \$11.6bn infrastructure growth package to include research infrastructure.

Ian Chubb, Australia's chief scientist who was on the working group, said research infrastructure was as important to productivity, economic growth and jobs as roads, ports and airports.

"If the government accepts the recommendations it will take research infrastructure off its short-term painful agenda," Professor Chubb said.

"More importantly, it's about productivity and jobs. Research infrastructure is as

Opposition higher education spokesman Kim Carr has previously proposed that money from the Education Investment Fund be quarantined for research infrastructure. But Mr Clark said the money just needed to come from the government's larger infrastructure fund.

The fund would cover the ongoing costs of major national research facilities such as the Square Kilometre Array, Australian Antarctic research facilities, the research vessel Investigator and dozens of facilities currently bundled under the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy. It would also pay for new facilities, as determined by an independent board.

Vicki Thomson, chief executive of the Group of Eight, said the report identified a really significant structural flaw in the innovation system and provided a sensible and long-term solution.

“The government now has a once in a lifetime opportunity in front of them to secure long-term funding, guaranteed funding for national research infrastructure. We cannot let this opportunity be wasted if we are serious and genuine about the value of research to our economy,” Ms Thomson said.

A government spokesman could not say when the report would be released.

“The government is committed to the long-term sustainability of research infrastructure funding. The government has received the Clark review and is currently considering its findings,” he said.

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