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Why women flee sci-tech sectors is not brain science

JOHN ROSS THE AUSTRALIAN DECEMBER 14, 2015 12:00AM



Women 'are significantly under-represented in high-level research positions'.

Malcolm Turnbull's plan to flood the science and technology sectors with women may be doomed to failure because almost one-third of the existing female workforce are making plans to abandon their careers.

A new survey has found 31 per cent of female scientists and technicians expect to leave the fields over the next five years, with more than half citing bleak career prospects.

The report suggests systemic bias, pay inequities and a blokey culture are threatening the already low levels of female participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Peak body Professionals Australia, which will release the report today, said the issue was more than a matter of equity. "Australia's productivity potential and innovative capability depend on a sustainable STEM skills pipeline," said chief executive Chris Walton.

"Research shows 75 per cent of the fastest growing occupations require STEM skills, and employers report difficulties recruiting qualified staff. We cannot build a knowledge economy if women are under-represented in maths, science and engineering."

Last week's innovation statement included a \$13 million scheme to draft girls and women into the science, technology, engineering and mathematics industries.

“Women hold around a quarter of STEM-related jobs and are significantly under-represented in high-level research positions,” the statement notes.

The new report suggests the sector will struggle to retain the women it already employs, with half expecting to jettison their professions over the next decade. And two-thirds anticipate leaving their current employers by 2020, with more than half of these saying a dearth of career advancement opportunities is making them look elsewhere.

Mr Walton said the pay gap was the biggest issue for female STEM professionals, who earned on average 24.4 per cent less than their male colleagues.

These figures were based on a comparison of the earnings of full-time staff, and not attributable to women working shorter hours.

Yet part-time work did weigh against women, with 62 per cent of respondents saying it had negatively impacted their careers. More than half said they had been unnecessarily excluded from certain jobs because they worked part-time, with one-quarter saying they had been overlooked for promotion.

Seven in 10 said taking parental leave had also dented their careers, with 21 per cent saying it had ruled them out of promotions.

The report said some claimed to have been offered “demotion” when they returned from parental leave, showing the “blunt operation of systemic bias” against women with carer responsibilities.

The report was based on salary and work condition details provided by 5500 professionals, and a detailed questionnaire completed by 432 women.