

Press Release

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Urgent action needed to stem slump in geoscience graduates

The peak body representing major geoscience organisations has called for urgent action to promote geoscience studies as it revealed a 40 per cent slump in students completing degrees over the past eight years.

The alarming detail is contained in the Australian Geoscience Council's Australian Tertiary Geoscience Education Profile report, which tracked changes in key metrics including enrolments and academic staffing levels since 2003.

Report author and President of the UNSW Academic Board Professor David Cohen said universities, government geological surveys and the resources industry were concerned with the low number of students entering geoscience programs in Australia.

The dearth of geoscientists, which is replicated globally, threatens to crimp Australia's ability to find, define and mine key minerals needed in a decarbonised future.

The report said the lack of exposure and awareness of geoscience in Australian secondary schools remained an issue.

"It is partly linked to the lack of earth science teachers and other problems in the STEM disciplines," it said. "A lack of scientific literacy in the general population does not serve the development of science policy or assist the sector in encouraging support for higher education and research in geoscience."

On staffing, it said some Australian university departments made significant cuts to Earth science academic support staff in response to actual or perceived reductions in university budgets due to COVID-19.

Professor Cohen said: "While universities have endeavoured to maintain geoscience programs, financial pressures have resulted in the loss of geoscience programs at two institutions in the last three years."



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“Australia is blessed with amazing geology – from some of the oldest rocks and earliest indicators of life on Earth to spectacular mineral deposits that formed as our continent evolved.

“A better understanding of Australia’s geological endowment and the processes that have led to the creation of our continent need to be embedded in the school science syllabus.

“We must increase the general awareness of the geosciences in the community and highlight the range of career opportunities for geoscience graduates amongst school students and their influencers.”

Chair of the Heads of Geoscience Schools Forum, Professor Ian Fitzsimons of Curtin University, said it was vital to increase the number of students entering geoscience programs to maintain the strength of geoscience in Australia.

“Australian universities and research organisations have a long and distinguished track record in both pure and applied geoscience research, including areas ranging from resource discovery to environmental management,” Professor Fitzsimons said.

Chair of the Australian Geoscience Council, Dr Kevin Cassidy said the Australian economy was highly dependent on the discovery of new mineral resources, including critical minerals.

“This includes materials desperately needed to help us transition to a low-carbon economy,” Dr Cassidy said. “The resources industry, including minerals, energy and water, is very concerned that Australia and other countries are producing insufficient geoscience graduates to meet demand in the short to medium term.”

Chair of the Australian Academy of Sciences National Committee of the Earth Sciences, Professor Ian Jackson, said publication of the report provided a timely warning concerning geoscience training in Australia.

“The decline in graduates is partly attributable to the boom-bust cycle of the mineral exploration industry and continues to threaten the viability of university geoscience departments,” Professor Jackson said.

“The enrolment trends suggest that governments and the broader public are insufficiently aware of the vital role of geoscience in understanding the broad interface between humans and our planet, including pressing concerns about changing climate, scarce sub-surface water resources, and the emerging need for critical metals for our decarbonised future.”

The report is available at: <https://www.agc.org.au/resources/reports/australian-geoscience-council-report/>

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ABOUT

The Australian Geoscience Council (AGC) is the peak council of geoscientists in Australia. It represents eight major Australian geoscientific societies with a total membership of over 8000 individuals comprising industry, government and academic professionals in the fields of geology, geophysics, geochemistry, mineral and petroleum exploration, environmental geoscience, hydrogeology and geological hazards.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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