

# The Australian

## Plan to meld maths PhDs into workforce

- **Jill Rowbotham**
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on Plummer, a mathematics PhD student at RMIT University, is doing an internship at Creative Analytics. Picture: David Geraghty

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**EMPLOYERS** have long grumbled about graduates and PhDs who are highly qualified in their field but lack other attainments needed to be immediately useful in the workforce, particularly communication skills and business nous.

Hence, the Australian Technology Network of universities' new trial of a doctorate in mathematics that will involve students with the industry from start to finish.

The pilot "industrial PhD" will be offered via ATN's industry doctoral training centre (mathematics) and will accommodate 20 to 25 doctoral students each year starting next year, said Attila Brungs, ATN spokesman and University of Technology, Sydney, deputy vice-chancellor (research).

"Both sides will get to know each other," Professor Brungs said.

That the ATN chose mathematics is unsurprising given it's a discipline staring at an acute shortage of graduates unless someone, somehow, persuades school-leavers there is a future in it.

"Supply predictions are flat," said Geoff Prince, director of the Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute.

The need for mathematics PhDs is projected to rise 37 per cent between 2011 and 2020 because of its application in a wide range of fields from cryptography and finance to computer and biological sciences.

"A big part of our interest [in the new program] is to make mathematics PhDs more attractive," Mr Prince said. "And there is an urgent need to prepare mathematical sciences PhD students for careers as innovators, a characteristic fundamental to their employers."

Mr Prince and his team have the distinction of running the closest thing that exists to the industrial PhDs the ATN will trial.

Since 2002, postgraduates such as RMIT's Jon Plummer have been able to apply for three to five-month placements with companies in need of their services. "It gets you away from all the theoretical stuff to the real world where you have to apply it," Mr Plummer said of his placement with Melbourne's Creative Analytics, specialising in software and consulting for the electricity market.

"You are dealing with people who are technical but not in the same discipline you are: you have to be able to communicate with them, writing things in a way they understand."

Mr Plummer has been investigating pricing models to enable the valuation of gas contracts so Creative Analytics can make a decision on diversification.

He is among 40 students the institute has placed.

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