

The Australian

Centre will link business and postgrads

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University of South Australia maths professor Lee White is foundation director of the Industry Doctoral Training Centre. Picture: Alan Pryke

Source: The Australian

LEE White is a mathematics professor, but his most important role in the next year will be as super-salesman for the \$1 million Industry Doctoral Training Centre.

The premise is that candidates will receive a new kind of training, grounded in the scholarly tradition but directed outward, towards solving real problems in Australian companies. It is part of the government's push to stimulate and support innovation. And it's up to the University of South Australia's Professor White, just announced as its foundation director, to get things moving.

The centre, an initiative of the Australian Technology Network of universities, is an idea whose time has come.

"Australian industry needs this and universities need to be going in this direction," Professor White said. "We need to be operating with about 100 students in this scheme in four years. It will be deemed a success if it's self-sustaining and that requires industry to come to the party."

Part of his role is to broker matches between students who are about to embark on PhDs and companies that have specific problems they want students to work on during the life of the four-year doctorate.

By January, Curtin University, UniSA, RMIT University, University of Technology, Sydney and Queensland University of Technology hope to have recruited up to five students each and hooked them up with companies. Apart from tackling real-life problems, the plan is for each group of students to form a solid network with each other, so they will be brought together twice a year to discuss their projects and to learn non-academic skills such as communication, leadership and project management.

Companies will pay \$40,000 a year to cover tuition and other expenses. They will have a say in their candidate's selection and the prospect of hiring them at the completion of the doctorate.

Professor White argued it was a cost-effective way for a company to gain a highly trained employee familiar with and committed to the operation. Even better, if a company could identify within its ranks someone the IDTC judged was capable of taking on the doctoral course, they needed only provide \$10,000 a year to cover expenses.

"The supervisory system will be unique," Professor White said. "Students will have an industry supervisor, someone in the company who has a stake in seeing the research project come to fruition; an area supervisor from the university in which they are enrolled; and a committee of supervisors from the ATN universities to inject the maximum expertise into the project."

"What they are finding in England, where this was pioneered, is that industry is starting to view this program as more effective than an MBA. The student who does the program will be the go-to person in the company regarding the problem it wants solved, but they will have these leadership skills as well."

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