

Reports plot research course

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UniSA physicist Tanya Monro argues industry involvement is essential in research. Source: Supplied

THERE'S nothing more fun for an academic than seeing the emergence of a fully fledged researcher," says Adelaide physicist Tanya Monro, who at last count had supervised 34 PhD students.

"But until we can see a significant proportion of those people employed in interesting jobs in - Australian industry, we're missing a trick."

As a member of the new Commonwealth Science Council, Professor Monro spent much of last month's inaugural meeting considering two key documents: the federal government's Industry Innovation and Competitiveness Agenda and Chief Scientist Ian Chubb's report on the future of science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

Professor Chubb's document plots a wide-ranging science strategy based on four broad pillars — competitiveness, education and training, research and international engagement — while the industry statement prescribes a research focus on industries in which Australia has commercial strength.

Professor Monro, head of research at the University of South Australia, said the two approaches were not incompatible, with no suggestion that a focus on commercially profitable research would rule out the "purely curiosity-driven" variety. And she said the narrower focus of the industry statement offered a survival strategy for broad research.

She argues that industry involvement is essential for another key reason — the unsustainability of the employment model of research.

“While we have an academic workforce that is rewarded purely on academic impact — such as citations and journal quality — we’re also producing graduates in that mould,” she said. “One of Australia’s biggest structural problems is that the industry we have, on the whole, isn’t a good fit with the university capacity we have. If you have priorities that focus researchers’ minds, you have a chance of filling that gap.”

Professor Monro said the government’s priority areas were not about turning a quick buck from university research, a goal widely considered extremely difficult.

“The money needed to produce a translated product (massively) exceeds the money needed to prove the concept on the lab bench. And we’re not in a climate that is going to suddenly magnify the funding to the sector.

“So if we want to do more of that we have to do it with the end users, with industry.”

Professor Chubb said his focus was determining where the \$9.2 billion public research and development spend was going.

“It’s easy beating the drum and saying we should have 3 per cent of GDP because everybody else has that as a target. But we’ve got to have a much better fix on what we’re doing now before we can say there’s a case for more spending.”

Professor Monro said the government was unlikely to agree to any research funding target “until we have a sense we are spending it the right way”.

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