

Australia lagging way behind other OECD countries in innovation

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Australia's innovation performance compared to other OECD countries is "appalling", according to Professor Robin Batterham, Kernot Professor at the University of Melbourne and former Australian Chief Scientist.

Professor Batterham, a keynote speaker at the Cooperative Research Centres (CRCs) Association conference in Adelaide today (15 May 2012) said Australia had only one third the average number of patents of other OECD countries.

"We are also near the bottom of the list on the OECD table for business and higher education collaboration," he said. "If we are reliant on innovation then we are not doing so well. There is an argument that Australia needs to get smarter, but innovation does not come easily."

Professor Batterham said that globally energy costs will continue to rise especially as developing economies mature: "We will all face significantly more costs in energy whether we like it or not. No-one is immune to the mounting cost pressures".

Professor Batterham said the secret to innovation is collaboration and the secret to collaboration is people. He quoted Harvard neuroscientist Jason Mitchell: "The most dramatic innovation introduced with the roll out of our species is not the prowess of individual minds, but the ability to harness the prowess across many individuals".

He labelled the way current collaboration is funded through Australian Research Council's linkages and transformational hub grants as "wrong, wrong, wrong". This is because successful funders are chosen by academics alone rather than by academics and industry.

Professor Batterham also said CRCs, which have a good collaboration model in place, should be funded in a two-step process so that all the funding for the next seven years does not need to be sorted to the nth degree right from the start.

"We have to see a doubling or trebling of funds going to collaboration as this is our competitive advantage in Australia."

Professor Batterham's thoughts were echoed by the Director of GE's ecoimagination for Australia and New Zealand, Ben Waters, who spoke next at the CRCA conference.

"Innovation today is often led by small companies rather than large and is driven by creativity rather than scientific research," he said. "Australia has a low level of innovation which is fragmented."

Mr Waters said ecoimagination would be announcing a \$10 million initiative later this year to fund new ideas for low carbon technologies in Australia and New Zealand.

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