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Graduate internships aim to bridge gap to industry

Andrew Trounson | July 30, 2008

A CANADIAN-STYLE graduate internship program is being promoted to government as a better way to connect university researchers to industry. The plan is for a central agency acting on behalf of the university sector to entice industry with short-term placements and projects that don't scare off business with substantial up-front commitments.

It is being promoted by the Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute, which wants to emulate the success of its Canadian sister organisation, whose internship program covers all research disciplines and is on track to secure 800 internships this year compared with 18 four years ago.

It comes as Universities Australia will promote a much bigger internship plan, aimed primarily at providing relevant work experience for undergraduates, at a conference on Friday. University Australia's program aims to provide internships for about 70,000 students a year.

The Canadian program is run by the country's peak maths body, the Mathematics of Information Technology and Complex Systems, and branded Accelerate Canada.

It works by having about 20 business development staff members acting as matchmakers between universities and industry to come up with research projects, typically of four months' duration.

According to Accelerate president Jim Brookes, in about 45 per cent of cases the postgraduate intern ends up being hired by the business.

"It is about putting a toe in the water," Mr Brookes told the HES on a visit to Australia last week.

Under the Canadian system, each internship costs about \$15,000 (\$15,347), with the cost evenly split between government and the business. Of this, about \$10,000 is paid to the intern, with the balance going towards the cost of the scheme and research expenses at the supervising university.

So far AMSI has just one placement under its belt and eight in development. But the institute's Thomas Montague said: "We think we have a good opportunity here. The Government is well disposed to the concept of forming linkages between industry and universities more efficiently."

The first internship involved a University of South Australia researcher working with TMG Rail Technology to better calibrate train running times to demand.

Depending on the duration of the AMSI internships, usually three to five months, the cost is up to \$30,000, with the industry partner and federal Government splitting the cost between them.

Up to \$15,000 of this goes to the intern and a further \$5000 to the supervisor or institution.

Dr Montague said the cost, relatively higher than that of the Canadian scheme, stemmed from strong demand for highly qualified mathematicians in the finance sector.

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