

have increased from 1.2 per cent to 1.5 per cent, they remain well below parity.

Technology, said universities should not be disheartened by the recent figures showing only in-

creases, the low-SSES component would reach 18 per cent by 2020. But she said this was good progress, given that raw numbers of

and Partnerships Program — subsequently reduced to the Higher Education Participation Program — had been crucial to progress,

Dr Harvey attributed the drop-off in regional participation to underachievement at school. He said many non-urban

There's quite a lot of growth coming through the system that we probably didn't think was there five or 10 years ago."

Merck to invest \$700m in drug

SEAN PARNELL
JOHN ROSS

In what is shaping up as one of the biggest commercialisation deals ever for antipodean university research, pharmaceutical giant Merck will pay up to \$US500 million (\$707m) for an Australian drug discovery.

The drug could help people with a wide range of cancers as well as blood disorders such as sickle cell disease. It was developed by the Co-operative Research Centre for Cancer Therapeutics, with support from Britain's Wellcome Trust and the commercialisation arm of Cancer Research UK.

It is set to now deliver financial returns to research partners including CSIRO, Monash University, Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre and the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute. Merck will make an upfront payment of more than \$21m and potential payments of \$700m-plus, most of which will flow to the CRC and its research partners.

Monash haematologist Stephen Jane said the additional payments were tied to developmental milestones including animal and early-stage human studies, followed by phase two and three clinical trials.

"As each hopefully is successful, that triggers an additional payment from Merck to all the partners," he said.

Professor Jane said Monash alone stood to gain more than \$140m. "It must be one of the biggest deals signed in the history of the country — I don't think there would be too many other deals in the ballpark."

CSIRO's Tom Peat said the researchers were "thrilled" to see the drug move to clinical trials and, if successful, to worldwide commercialisation.

Dr Peat said the drug targeted the protein PRMT5, which is associated with a range of tumours including mantle cell lymphoma and lung, breast and colorectal cancer.

"Patients who have these types of cancers often have high levels of this protein, which is unfortunately also linked to poor survival rates," he said. "Using our recombinant protein production facilities, we were able to produce samples of these proteins, crystallise them for structure-based drug design and support the consortium's pre-commercial investigations and trials."

The deal has been signed just months after Malcolm Turnbull staked Australia's future on an "ideas boom" underpinned by blockbuster research discoveries. "We need to be able to combine science with industry in an innovative way that enables us to stay ahead of the curve," the Prime Minister said last year. "(Often) technology gets started but then there is a long, long slog before it gets to commercialisation. That is what is called the valley of death — it's actually the valley of no cash flow."

Professor Jane said it could be difficult to interest big pharma companies in products at early stages of development. But the new drug had benefited from a "very good target, strong data in a myriad of cancers, outstanding pre-development work, and very high specificity".

"Once you get to that point, there's no shortage of interest," he said. "The sharks will circle."

Monash scheme tackles gender bias head on



Monash University professors Christina Mitchell (medicine) left, Kim Cornish (neurosciences) and Moira O'Bryan (anatomy and developmental biology)

JOHN ROSS

Of all Australian universities, Monash should be the most benign territory for female academics trying to crash through the glass ceiling. Monash's vice-chancellor, provost and vice-provost of research are all women.

And while the upper echelons of medical faculties are notoriously male-dominated, the eastern Melbourne university again bucks the trend. It boasts the Group of Eight's only female dean of medicine, Australia's first female head of a surgery department and a female director of a neuroscience research institute.

While Monash is unique in its concentration of women at the top, it reflects other Australian universities on the next rung down, where men occupy about 80 per cent of professorial and associate professorial positions.

Now the university is address-

ing the problem through its pilot of Britain's Athena SWAN accreditation program, which aims to tackle gender bias in the academy.

Monash is one of 32 local institutions, including 25 universities, which have signed up to the two-year process. Detailed information on their policies, plans and gender profiles will be assessed and rated and successful competitors will be in line for "bronze" ratings — and possibly silver or gold, if the scheme progresses beyond pilot stage.

Monash's plans include a focus on unconscious bias. "You have to worry that you might be appointing people who are just like you," said vice-chancellor Margaret Gardner.

Professor Gardner, Australia's most senior female university boss, said having an executive dominated by women did not necessarily solve broader problems of gender balance. "But when you discuss diversity, it helps make an organisation more

sensitive to all forms of diversity," she said. "We're attuned to understanding that you have to be conscious of unconscious bias."

Reproductive biologist John Carroll, who is leading Monash's participation in the pilot, said unconscious bias training sessions were being run for all senior staff in a position to affect research careers. "We are in a situation where five of our six heads of department and five of our six program leaders are men.

"While we clearly have a lot of women at the very pinnacle of our university, we've still got a very male-dominated management structure."

Professor Carroll said the female-heavy executive "balances things out a little bit".

"But often the decisions made at that level aren't really affecting the day-to-day research success of individuals in the labs.

"When you get promoted, when you finish probation, opportunities for leadership positions — all those questions are

primarily being addressed in an environment which is very male-dominated."

Other Athena SWAN initiatives include a 60 per cent limit on either gender's representation on promotion, probation and recruitment committees. The same applies to shortlists for positions at senior lecturer level and above.

Professor Carroll said meeting the committee target had proven challenging, because members required a degree of seniority. "The risk you run is that the 20 per cent of women you have (at that level) end up spending most of their time on committees and not on research."

Developmental biologist Moira O'Bryan, who heads a gender equity committee covering three of Monash's biomedical institutes, said women's reluctance to apply for top positions was a factor. Most applicants for these jobs were men. "We need to be looking around for these bright young women, and saying, 'you're ready'."

Unicorns and the accidental entrepreneur

JULIE HARE

Nick Kaye was in the business of breeding unicorns and discovering angels long before it became fashionable.

The Australian-born, Melbourne-educated purveyor of innovative thinking runs the Stockholm School of Entrepreneurship, which, in partnership with five universities and a very generous benefactor, has been embedding entrepreneurial skills into masters and PhD students since 1998.

If the idea behind the SSES was ahead of its time, 18 years later, the rest of the world is breathlessly catching up.

"I'd say the school was at the cutting edge and I mean it honestly," says Mr Kaye, who will be in Sydney to run a breakfast forum next Tuesday as a guest of NSW Chief Scientist Mary O'Kane.

"Not only were we one of the

first to have a crack at entrepreneurship using an interdisciplinary approach, but we were also inter-institutional. That has not really been replicated with the same degree of success anywhere else."

Being ahead of the curve seems to be part of the Swedish DNA. The country was third on the most recent Global Innovation Index, behind Switzerland and Britain and ahead of The Netherlands, US and Finland. It was miles ahead of Australia, which was placed 17th.

Mr Kaye says about 5000 students applied to enter the program each year. About 4000 are turned away.

Students are usually moving into masters or PhD programs. There is a mix of domestic students from each of the five institutions and about 40 per cent international students. Masters students must be enrolled in one of partner the universities but

PhD students can come from any number of allied universities overseas, including Australia.

The curriculum is wideranging and deeply practical and at the end students should be able to create and manage their own business. While many do go into start-ups, Mr Kaye says it's not the school's definition of success.

"Certainly, one of our measures of success is the number of alumni start-ups and there have been some very successful ones," Mr Kaye said, pointing to music sharing site Soundcloud and online payment service Klarna, both of which are valued at more than \$US1 billion (\$1.4bn).

"The reality is we also define success as those who come through our program and join an early-stage team or go into a consultancy such as McKinsey or an innovative company such as Ericsson. These people are still very much at the forefront of innovation and entrepreneurship."

Director, A Health Serv

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