

AGSM

Electronics Innovator

What started as a hot new idea in a University of New South Wales (UNSW) laboratory seven years ago for computer engineer Dr Graham Hellestrand (MBA Exec '94) has now developed into a successful company headquartered in the US's Silicon Valley.

Hellestrand's virtual electronic systems – used to develop and verify the architecture, hardware and software of multi-processor wireless systems, consumer electronic devices and networked electronic controls systems for automobiles – could stand as an Aussie innovation success story. The VaST Systems Technology company he created now has offices in Sydney, Ann Arbor, Austin, Munich and Tokyo.

Despite VaST's success, its founder and CEO remains sceptical of Australia's capacity to commercialise ideas.

While Hellestrand's electronic system design has made a successful transition from laboratory to marketplace, he believes university research in Australia is not set up with the essential ingredients for commercialisation.

"Australia's lack of global technological and corporate footprint is not viable without the existence of a globally focused indigenous industry to capitalise on good research ideas," says Hellestrand.

Part of the problem, he says, is that leading researchers in Australia have little or no commercial skills or experience, and they lack the "immense leadership and political skills" needed to bring good ideas to market. He says that because of Australia's small engineering base, most bright graduates end up as consultants rather than executives leading engineering companies.

"Little has changed. The predominant Australian attitude remains 'we could have done that!' We need to help it change to 'we will do that'."

Hellestrand says the technology developed at UNSW in 1996, which founded VaST's business, has gone through four generations of redevelopment, on average once every 18 months.

In June, Hellestrand was elected a fellow of the US Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers for his contribution to technology, society and the engineering profession.

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