

## Thinking for the future

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**"Today people drive cars, but tomorrow cars could drive people." Such a bold, futuristic statement, but one Professor Mary-Anne Williams says with confidence.**



As Director of the Innovation and Enterprise Research Laboratory, Williams is a firm believer in mankind's ability to turn big, futuristic ideas into reality.

**People coming from very different disciplines and perspectives, looking at something with their own eyes; to me that's where innovation occurs.**

Affectionately dubbed The Magic Lab, the laboratory is part of the Centre for Quantum Computing and Intelligent Systems. It aims to offer a collaborative research environment for ambitious researchers and students – those who want to "pursue complex issues of significant impact that require the coherent fusion of a big vision, an expansive imagination and advanced technologies," Williams declares daringly. "The Magic Lab is designed to be a place where magic happens. Magic is an evocative metaphor for innovation."

A major strength of the lab is its forward-thinking experimentation in the field of robotics. One of its current projects aims to give life to a robot, while also exploring the socio-legal implications involved. Williams says thought control, once considered science fiction, is now a reality.



Mary-Anne Williams

"Major advances in cognitive technologies over the last few years will lead to the disruptive adoption of autonomous systems that can think for themselves. In other words, instead of a robot's behaviours being carefully scripted by engineers, robots themselves will be able to make and enact sophisticated decisions. People will interact with all kinds of smart devices and services that can anticipate and adapt to their needs in new and innovative ways."

It may all sound like the basis for a sci-fi blockbuster, however Williams argues it is simply the result of industry leaders recognising the potential emerging technologies have for enhancing business competitiveness and performance through innovation.

"The ability of firms to create and harness ideas is increasingly important under the competitive pressures influencing businesses in the current global economy. Innovation involves the creation of new value that can be generated within an

organisation's management structure, or delivered as new products and services.

"Continual strategic innovation has been recognised as a key ingredient for sustained success. Without it, firms fail to adapt to changing markets, and that reality provides a compelling imperative for them to play with intent, to learn quickly and to innovate effectively."

Director of the Creative Industries Innovation Centre (CIIC), Lisa Colley, agrees the harnessing of ideas is important for continued success – in any sector. "Innovation doesn't have to be a huge shiny thing. People coming from very different disciplines and perspectives, looking at something with their own eyes, acknowledging each other's diverse strengths and contributions to create something that really pushes the boundaries; to me that's where innovation occurs."

As part of the Australian Government's Enterprise Connect initiative, the CIIC, which is based at UTS, aims to help small to medium creative firms reach their business potential and improve their operations, productivity and effectiveness – in part, by accessing existing resources.



Lisa Colley

"There are resources out there which many creative companies don't know exist. We'll help connect them to these, as well as develop a range of new resources." The new CIIC website will be one of these.

"We're currently developing a web-based program that will deliver a range of services to support these smaller creative enterprises," explains Colley. These services will enable creative industries access to networking, training opportunities, business development and learning-focused online resources and events. It will also include a tool that allows companies to self-assess and determine best-practice next steps.

Colley hopes to focus attention on creative firms who have a great idea, but need help turning it into a commercial product or income-generating service. These firms can come from a vast array of industries, from architecture through to digital media or visual and performing arts.

"We'll be providing case studies and stories about successful companies and entrepreneurs who had an idea, developed it into a profitable business and what they learnt along the way. This allows creative business people to take advice from those within their own industries."

Just as the CIIC utilises UTS's diverse pool of expertise and kick-starts industry networks, so too does the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG). The new centre, announced last November by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, was given \$8 million by the Australian Government to go towards its establishment.



Graham Sansom

Working with both internal and external groups who have a track record in local government innovation, including the Institute for Sustainable Futures and the faculty of Business, ACELG will assist in the development of a "world-class local government to meet the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century Australia."

Centre Director, Graham Sansom, believes such a vision requires a continual pursuit of excellence in both management and political governance, and agrees innovation is fundamental to progress.

"What's required is for each local council to critique the way it's currently doing things, exchange ideas with others – not just its neighbours but right across Australia and internationally – and then make incremental

changes."

Sansom argues it's essential to look beyond local government itself – to other governments, the private sector and community-based organisations – to inspire good governance and progressive practice.

"Local government is under enormous pressure to become more efficient and effective. Resources are already scarce and councils are facing huge challenges to expand and improve services, to deal with backlogs in infrastructure, to engage more with their communities, and to work with the Federal Government on national priorities such as climate change. Not being innovative isn't an option."

ACELG will encourage innovation through a range of Australia-wide programs and supporting research. One of these programs, Innovation and Best Practice, focuses on establishing a 'knowledge exchange' – identifying key areas of local government activity where improved, innovative approaches have worked.

"What's often missed when people talk about exchanging 'best practice' is that middle step of closely examining the practices involved to ensure that they really do have something to offer others," says Sansom. "To capture precisely what it is that's made them successful and how to transfer that 'essence' to others – that's innovation."

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