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Uni's pitch for robots

TORY SHEPHERD

ADELAIDE would become the home of a national centre for smart machines, robotics and artificial intelligence under an ambitious pitch to address fears that Australia is losing the global race.

The University of Adelaide is proposing a \$150 million National Centre of Excellence in Machine Learning at the burgeoning Lot Fourteen precinct.

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Push for Adelaide to be home of robotics

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The project would be funded by \$80 million from governments, \$20 million from universities and \$50 million from industry. Driverless cars, smart weapons, the space industry, and even saving water and making better wine depend on the technologies of the future.

But skilled workers are being lured overseas by high salaries in big-spending countries such as China and the US, where a graduate can walk into a \$350,000 a year role. Chinese investment on artificial intelligence is 100 times greater per person than Australia.

Machine learning is related to artificial intelligence. Computers use algorithms to crunch lots of data and learn from it – in driverless cars, for example.

University of Adelaide com-

puter science Professor Anton van den Hengel is the director of the National Institute for Machine Learning, an anchor tenant at the Lot Fourteen precinct.

He said Australia was getting “left behind” on investment in cutting-edge technologies that would be critical to existing and future industries. The institute is working with grape growers in the Riverland who are struggling with expensive and scarce water.

The plan is to use cameras and sensors to collect data that will then use machine learning

to advise grape growers and predict vine performance.

“They are facing constant competition from lower-wage countries,” Prof van den Hengel said. “Their goal is not to lower wages. They just want better information so they can make high-quality, higher

value grapes with the wage structure they’ve got. Their water costs are going up. AI means better use of the water

... you can precisely give the vines the amount of water that will maximise the value of the crop.”

Prof van den Hengel said hundreds of companies were asking his institute for help with new technologies but Australia’s expertise was being sucked overseas. Creating a new hub for AI research could keep people here, he said.

The huge spending in China,

Russia and the US was about national security, he said, and was central to major SA projects such as the \$50 billion naval shipbuilding and the fledgling space industry.

“There’s no way we’re going to be able to mine asteroids or



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use the data from these satel-
lites or defend the country if
we don't have people with
these skills," he said.
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THE FUTURE: University of Adelaide Professor Anton van den Hengel is leading a push for a centre for smart machines, robotics and artificial intelligence. Picture: MATT TURNER