

Start-up guru's science warning

EXCLUSIVE

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The co-founder of start-up poster-child Atlassian, Mike Cannon-Brookes has sounded an alarm about Australia's complacency on innovation and called for greater investment in maths and science education.

Mr Cannon-Brookes, one of the nation's leading tech entrepreneurs, said "everybody has to understand that investing in education is important, we have to be dispassionate and factual about where we currently sit in education and how we move forward and what changes we need to make to move forward".

The co-chief executive of Atlassian — an enterprise software company valued at \$US5.8 billion (\$7.82bn), which is more than Qantas — said the hardest thing for politicians to do was stop playing politics and start explaining why innovation was critical.

Other countries had thrown resources at programs to improve skills in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) because they understood the value for their economies over the next 25 years.

"The challenge is not that we've gone a long way backwards; it's that everyone else has gone forward a lot faster," he said.

"We certainly have not been investing in STEM as much as we should have been in the last five to 10 years. You see other countries that are making much heavier and more aggressive investments in these areas."

Britain, he said, had begun investing heavily in STEM in schools about four years ago.

"Obviously none of those kids have graduated yet but they started, call it, five years before Australia if we started today. Now that means somewhere at the end of that pipe, there are kids coming out at 18 who have done STEM for 13 years. Even if we started today, that cohort of kids leaving are going to be five years ahead of Australia."

His comments come on the back of this week's release of the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study, which showed Australian Year 4 and Year 8 students lagging behind their global peers in maths and science.

Mr Cannon-Brookes said other countries had realised "many of the skills in every business going forward are going to involve some flavour of technology".

Australian Industry Group head Innes Willox said the Australian economy would increasingly need people with STEM skills. "These TIMSS results indicate we are moving further away and not closer to this. There needs to be an urgent focus in the schooling system to turn this around," he said. "Reform of the way our schools are funded is a critical step to addressing this."

Australian Mathematical Sciences Institute director Geoff Prince said without "decisive action" Australian industry would "be forced to seek STEM skills internationally to maintain our competitive position".

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