

The challenge is to innovate

Damien Lynch

The 2006 winner of the Melbourne University Entrepreneurs' Challenge will be announced tomorrow against a backdrop of claims that Australian business owners need to be more innovative or they will stagnate in a global context.

MUEC is one of Australia's largest student-run business plan competitions. Started by Melbourne Business School MBA students in 1999, it provides an opportunity for members of the Melbourne University community to refine their new venture creation and business planning skills.

Applicants don't have to be a Melbourne University student to enter the competition, but 30 per cent of any team must be enrolled students or staff members of a Victorian University in the year of entry.

This year around \$45,000 worth of prizes will be up for grabs at a finals night to be held at Melbourne Town Hall on May 10. But the real prize for finalists of this competition, and especially the winners, is that it opens up doors for them.

Elaine Saunders of Dynamic Hearing and Ken Baker of IntelliGuard, winners in 2000 and 2004 respectively, have used their MUEC success to turn their business plans into successful products, business ventures and companies.

Dr Saunders was on a seven-member team consisting of research staff from the University of Melbourne and the Bionic Ear



Elaine Saunders won the challenge in 2000.

Photo: JESSICA SHAPIRO

Institute that won MUEC with a business plan on advanced digital solutions for better hearing in all environments.

She said winning the competition enabled her team to raise up to \$2 million in venture

capital funding for the clinical trial and further development of the core technology. It also laid the platform for the formation in February 2002 of Victoria-based Dynamic Hearing, a research driven tech-

nology company that specialises in developing solutions for better hearing in all listening environments.

Dynamic Hearing has inside the last four years developed several key commercial partnerships with chip manufacturers, while its advanced digital amplifier, ADRO, is established in Europe, the US, Australia, and Japan.

The company has 18 full-time and five part-time staff and works with two international consultants, one in the US and the other in Japan, on a retainer basis.

Victoria-based IntelliGuard IT was already in existence two years before it formed an alliance with two university staff to win MUEC for their internet traffic management security system.

IntelliGuard, which now has nine full-time staff, is halfway through the technical development of the product, with 15 months still to go.

The success and endeavours of Dr Saunders and Mr Baker seem to contrast with the findings in the latest Westpac Global Entrepreneurship Monitor research.

That research found that though Australian business ownership participation rates are among the highest of the developed world, Australians cannot classify themselves as entrepreneurial. True innovation is simply not a feature of the nation's business landscape. It adds that most Australian business owners are classifiable as managers, not entrepreneurs.