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## Household names in space: Startups ready for out-of-this-world growth

Startups usually have "blue-sky" levels of ambition, though founders like Dr Alex Grant say space tech businesses have a right to be particularly optimistic.

"I think there's a genuine opportunity here for Australia to build some household names — we've got the seeds growing. I fully expect within a small number of years, we will have really big successes," the chief executive of Myriota says.



Myriota co-founder Dr Alex Grant.

Myriota is an internet-of-things startup looking to bring "data connectivity to the entire planet". The company's sensor technology has a long battery life and can communicate with a network of nanosatellites for tasks like remote meter readings, weather sensors and irrigation testing.

Over the past year it's launched a number of partnerships in sectors like agriculture and telecommunications, including with the business arm of Optus for its internet-of-things projects.

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Myriota has also inked a statement of strategic intent with the Australian Space Agency. Now with the Morrison government's commitment to invest \$150 million over five years as part of NASA's moon-to-mars exploration program, Myriota is signalling it and other space startups are ready to become world-leaders in these kinds of missions.

"We're looking for opportunities to have technology applied to lunar or planetary missions, that have the need for connectivity," Grant says.

Myriota has started to generate revenue and has plans for expansion, including future possible capital raises, to build on the \$19 million series A round it completed back in August.

Australian innovation policy has seen lots of changes over the past five years, however, and Grant observes Australia has a "cyclical" relationship with space exploration.

Stability of policy will be needed if the country's startup scene is to truly become global players in space technology, he says.

"In our business, we benefit from international partnerships and buying products from overseas vendors who have had the benefit of decades of investment by their space agencies. This is now an opportunity for Australia to do a bit of that ourselves and really propel Australian companies in global supply chains. But that does require long duration, continuous support at the highest level."

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Dr Alex Grant, Myriota chief executive

In announcing the space plan two weeks ago, Minister for Innovation, Science and Industry Karen Andrews said the government will be "investing strongly" in the space startup sector in the coming years.

That commitment to future investment requires a game plan for generating talent, says Girl Geek Academy co-founder Sarah Moran.

The coding and technology education organisation recently acquired the Australian rights to the SheFlies suite of education programs for women in aviation, drone and space technology.



Sarah Moran, co-founder of Geek Girl Academy. *CREDIT: KRISTOFFER PAULSEN*

The programs will look to bolster women's involvement in these industries as the government amps up its investment.

"We've had interest from all over the world so the first stage will be an audit of who's who. Then we're going to formalise this and start working with different corporations — aviation is where we'll start," Moran says.

The group's aim is to act as a host to help bring young women face-to-face with workplaces in space tech and aviation, including through work experience programs.

Moran says the nation's renewed interest in space missions can generate energy and excitement about future career opportunities for girls.

"These careers are actually really fun and enjoyable — and what space has always represented is the ability to dream."

A Virgin Galactic rocket plane has soared to the edge of space with a test passenger successfully for the first time, nudging British billionaire Richard Branson's company closer to its goal of suborbital flights for space tourists.

Australia is still working to bring a more diverse range of talent into sectors connected to space exploration, including engineering and mathematics.

The government's decadal plan report on women in STEM careers found Australia's qualified stem workforce is made up of 84 per cent male workers compared to 16 per cent women.

It recommended strengthening the national education system to better support girls in transitioning into these careers, as well as reviewing the workplace culture of technology firms to ensure they are more open and welcoming environments.

This plan will be rolled out over the same time-frame as Australia's increased investment in space missions: the Australian government's Civil Space Strategy is also set to run from this year until 2028.