

Uber nabs U of T star as U.S. heavyweights poach Canadian AI talent

By Sean Silcoff

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Silicon Valley's raid of top Canadian artificial intelligence talent continued Monday as Uber Technologies said it had hired University of Toronto associate professor Raquel Urtasun, a leading expert in driverless car technology.

"She's a real star in this area, which is why Uber wants her," said Alan Bernstein, CEO of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research.

Ms. Urtasun is the latest Canadian-trained AI academic to be poached by U.S. heavyweights eager to capitalize on one of the hottest trends in technology – which was largely pioneered by scientists here. Researchers from U of T and the University of British Columbia now hold senior AI posts with Google, Apple, Facebook, Uber Technologies, Microsoft Corp. and Elon Musk's OpenAI, while Microsoft and Google have snapped up Canadian AI startups.

"Unfortunately, this kind of thing is happening more and more," said Yoshua Bengio, a renowned deep-learning scientist at University of Montreal at the heart of his city's flourishing AI scene. Mr. Bengio said he was concerned that as Silicon Valley drains universities of AI experts, there will be fewer people to train in-demand AI scientists.

In a blog post, Uber CEO Travis Kalanick said Ms. Urtasun, an expert in computer vision programming, will be based in Toronto's MaRS Discovery District and build a team of researchers drawn from "the region's impressive talent pool." Uber will also give \$5-million to the new Vector Institute, a Toronto organization aimed at stanching the brain drain of locally trained AI scientists co-founded by Ms. Urtasun and supported by the federal and Ontario governments.

While Ms. Urtasun's hiring further validates Toronto's global standing in AI, it represents "a loss economically for Canada" because profits from the technology she develops "will be taxed in the U.S. rather than in Canada," Dr. Bengio said. "It would be better for Canada if these kinds of deals were with Canadian companies or if these professors stayed in academia. Companies who can leverage this kind of expertise are going to produce a lot of growth."

Former BlackBerry Ltd. co-CEO Jim Balsillie noted that while Uber and the U.S. Treasury would ultimately benefit from Ms. Urtasun's research, she would continue to draw a taxpayer-subsidized salary from U of T. Ms. Urtasun will continue to work at U of T one day a week. Mr. Balsillie further criticized Ottawa for its \$125-million AI strategy unveiled in the budget and for championing foreign companies such as Google and Microsoft that invest in the AI ecosystem.

"It's disappointing...how hard our government is working to turn Canada into a branch plant economy that aims for pennies [from foreign direct investment into Canada] while ignoring the innovation billions," Mr. Balsillie said. "At its best the current AI strategy will result in a small handful of startups flipping for cheap to big multinationals the government is courting." He said Ottawa should instead focus on supporting homegrown companies that stay and scale up globally from Canada.

Richard Gold, associate dean of McGill University's faculty of law and a director of the Centre for Intellectual Property Policy, said "a deal that takes taxpayer-supported research to provide a foreign firm with patents does not provide a fair return to us. It may generate a few

jobs in the short term, but hinders our ability to create growth and thus jobs in the long term.”

Uber is coming off a string of public relations disasters, including a lawsuit filed in February by Google’s driverless car division, Waymo, alleging it used documents taken illegally by a former manager whose startup was later bought by the ride-sharing company. The company is

also notorious for a testosterone-heavy culture, as highlighted in a recent damning column by an ex-female employee accusing Uber of tolerating systematic sexual harassment and discrimination. “I had a lengthy conversation with Travis” before joining, Ms. Urtasun told Wired. “I am really convinced he is taking all the necessary steps.”