

Bright sparks can bring enlightenment

Businesses employing students for their ideas are getting very good value, writes **Rachel Lebian**.

Kirsten Coupland learned to bake bread over the summer. Traditional rustic sourdough. Not that she wants to be a baker, but she's an innovative type and was looking to test her business skills within a dynamic small enterprise. Meanwhile, artisan bakery Brasserie Bread required a go-getter to fast track some entrepreneurial ideas. A new internship program catered to both their needs.

Coupland was one of nine students at the University of NSW who spent the summer honing their business skills and innovative edge at an organisation selected specifically for the entrepreneurial experience it would offer participants.

They were the first students to undertake the Entrepreneurship Intern Program run by the university's Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, and came from disciplines as diverse as medicine, business, science and engineering.

The centre's director, Chris Witt, explains the program was designed for students from any discipline with an entrepreneurial flair: "The intersection being that you are trying to integrate innovation and entrepreneurship with the discipline that you train in."

"The common denominator is you're looking at new developments, whether they be new products that can lead to new product lines, or expansion in terms of geographic expansion."

In the case of Brasserie Bread, it was about positioning the company to grow, at ResMed it was looking into new products, and at Harris Farm Markets it was about assessing the viability of reducing the company's carbon footprint by recycling green waste.

Other participating companies were Hostworks, Monkey Steel, WorleyParsons, Australian



Kirsten Coupland thought of holiday fun for children while baking with David James at Brasserie Bread.
Photo: JIM RICE

Technology Park Innovations, National ICT Australia and Zip Industries.

All placements were full time for 10 to 12 weeks and students were paid a minimum of \$600 a week.

Hassan Ahmed, a third-year medical school student who interned at biotechnology outfit ResMed, moved around the different divisions. This gave him a solid understanding of how the company operated and made the experience "very dynamic and diverse".

He says the work he undertook enabled him to use his medical knowledge in a commercial context and was immediately relevant to his university studies.

"We're actually studying the respiratory pathology at the moment, and a lot of the patients we visit at hospitals are using a form of respiratory treatment that I am now intrinsically familiar with as a result of my immersion in that particular industry," he says.

"I've also been able to use the experience and some of the lessons taken from my time there as focuses for parts of assignments that I am currently completing, and will be for years to come."

Asked how the program has helped shape his future career, Ahmed says as a commercially minded medical student it reinforced his interest in innovation and entrepreneurship "and the

likelihood that I won't be a practicing physician for very long, if at all".

Coupland has just entered the honours year of a bachelor of science in biotechnology and recently completed a diploma in innovation management.

Her reason for joining the intern program was to put her business study into practice: "Put it to the test to see if I could do something other than science."

At Brasserie Bread, she undertook market research to see if there was room for the company to expand its line of cakes and pastries. She also helped develop a marketing campaign to promote the bakery's expanded training school, including bread and pastry-making classes for adults.

For someone from a "foodie family" and with a background in science, learning about starter cultures and fermentation during the baking process was a bonus.

Some of Coupland's own ideas were picked up by the company, including a new stream of baking classes for children during the summer holidays.

"You really do learn to market yourself," she says. "You have to sell your ideas to the boss and make them want to do it."

It's a skill she expects to draw on in her honours year, when she will have to make course presentations and sell project ideas.

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CHRIS WITT, DIRECTOR

David James, who runs Brasserie Bread, says pulling off the school holiday baking program was testament to Coupland's energy and determination.

"We've got an abundance of entrepreneurial ideas and projects we want to get on with, but with the pressures of running a company every day there are lots of ideas we don't get a chance to experiment with," he says.

"Her being here allowed us to develop that program, which we are now going to run again in the Easter school holidays. A lot of that probably wouldn't have happened, especially coming up to Christmas."

James admits it was also cheaper than bringing in a marketing professional and it opened his eyes to "how much can be done with a graduate". He has since employed a graduate to take over from Coupland after her internship ended and she returned to university.

Harris Farm Markets was considering recycling green waste from its 20-store chain as fertiliser for the company farm.

General manager of buying and marketing Tristan Harris says the intern he employed "identified the competing technologies and the pros and cons with each. Unfortunately, what it identified to us was that this was not something in a pre-carbon credit environment that makes commercial sense."

The alternative to using an intern would have been to pay a consultant to do the work, which would have been far more expensive, Harris says.

"It would have been terrible to think we were paying someone 100 bucks an hour to sit around waiting for phone calls and doing administrative things during the quiet times," Harris says.

Acknowledging his intern's strong motivation and ability to adapt to new tasks during quieter periods, Harris says he'd consider participating in the program again. "I would definitely do it again if I felt I had the right project," he says.

The program will run again at the end of the year and is likely to take on twice as many students.

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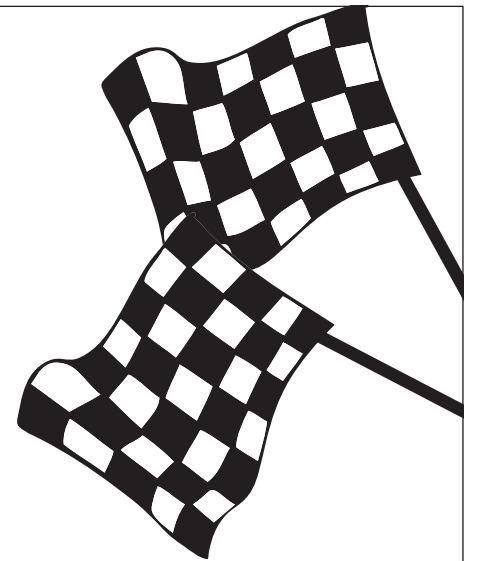
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