

Survey proves benefits of work experience

While there is much anecdotal evidence as to the value of relevant work experience programs for tertiary students, the release of the ACS Foundation's survey of its Work Integrated Learning scholarship holders has provided the quantitative and qualitative proof. The data supports our efforts to bridge the ICT training and workplace skills requirements of Australian industry and commerce.

This year alone, the ACS Foundation (ACSF) has raised more than \$7 million to provide more than 350 scholarships, including the Work Integrated Learning (WIL) scholarships for project-based real-life experiences to complement students' ICT academic studies.

Carolyn Toleman, manager of the very active and successful WA chapter of the ACSF, initiated the research. Of the 100 West Australian WIL scholarship holders from the past three years, 30 responded to the survey conducted in August. It provided us with an excellent evaluation of our program, including suggestions for improvements.

The results revealed that 78.6 per cent were offered a post-scholarship role by their host organisation. Overall, 96.6 per cent found employment in the ICT industry after completing their studies, with 67.9 per cent finding a job immediately.

Applying skills in the real world

In answer to questions on the advantages gained by undertaking a WIL placement, the overwhelming number of responses covered the benefits of "getting exposure to the actual working environment and culture" to better prepare students for the workplace.

Not only does the WIL program provide "a foot in the door but it is a tremendous

opportunity to start learning rather than 'learning to learn' as taught in university".

The relevant and up-to-date experiences introduced WIL interns to professional ethics and behaviour, communications and team work.

One scholarship holder said: "The mentoring in the workplace helped me transition from uni knowledge to the application of practical knowledge." And in another comment: "While you're undertaking a WIL, people in the organisation understand that you are a trainee and try to teach you as much as they can. The experience gained is immense."

As the internships are undertaken during the students' university training, they often had a positive impact on academic success. The students are able to see the relevance of what they had considered as abstract studies: "I had the opportunity to gain knowledge on specific areas not studied during my courses as well as assisting my overall understanding of some specific units."

Many acknowledged the assistance WIL provided in developing their confidence in choosing the right career path. "I had exposure to a field which I would not otherwise have taken an interest in or pursued a career in. The industry-relevant training allowed a smooth transition into my job."

Importantly, "the knowledge and experiences I gained during my WIL placement helped me to shine among other graduates."

From the survey feedback, we are looking to hold events around the country to bring past and upcoming WIL scholarship holders together for networking and experience-sharing. We will be working with the donor organisations and university supervisors to develop performance reviews for interns' individual skills improvement. And we plan to survey the recent graduates every six months to gain a long-term picture.

From an industry perspective

There are more than 300 active scholarship supporters nationally. These organisations take students as part of their recruitment strategies as an opportunity to help develop the ICT industry.

CSG in WA is an excellent example. It has provided 20 WIL placements over four years and is currently recruiting a further two. Mark Bogos, manager of mid-market ERP solutions at CSG, explained the value of the WIL program

from the supporter perspective: "In a buoyant WA market, finding good employees is a challenge. The scholarship program provides CSG with access to some of the top students in the right technology areas, and at the same time to 'give something back'. We then work with each individual to make them productive very quickly. Through this process we have been able to convert a number of scholarship students into full-time employees who have gone on to be very capable consultants within our organisation."

Other long-term donors to the WA WIL program include IBM, ZettaServe, pieNETWORKS, Bankwest, Conducive and iVEC. Future Logic and Jason Windows have come on board this year. This range of multi-national organisations and smaller WA companies shows how applicable and valuable the WIL program is to enterprises across the spectrum.

The four Perth-based universities (UWA, ECU, Curtin and Murdoch) and the WA Government are sponsors of the ACSF WIL program. On 4 November at Parliament House, the ACS Foundation celebrated the awarding of 45 WIL scholarships in WA in 2011, worth in excess of \$900,000. This represents a significant injection of funds and broad support for our efforts to bridge the training and workplace requirements of Australian industry and commerce.

Jim Ellis, the chair of the WA chapter and director of the ACSF, also has a very positive view. "Our dynamic programs both influence and take input from everyone involved: industry, academics and trainees," he said. ■

John Ridge, executive director of the ACS Foundation

About The ACS Foundation (www.acsfoundation.com.au)

The ACS Foundation was established in August 2001 to encourage both private and public sponsorship of ICT higher education and research. By increasing funding opportunities for industry to contribute to education programs, the Foundation seeks to create a highly skilled workforce, able to effectively access research and industry-specific training. Since its establishment, the ACS Foundation has raised more than \$30 million and awarded more than 3000 scholarships.

The prime scholarship facilitator focused exclusively on the ICT industry, the ACS Foundation receives funding from ICT companies, industry associations, government bodies, individuals and the ACS itself. An ATO-designated Deductible Gift Recipient, the ACS Foundation provides tax effective programs for industry and private donors.

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Find out more

Available scholarships and details of the projects are continually updated on the ACS Foundation website.

The ACSF's NSW chapter is running an introduction to the scholarships program for prospective business partners and students in Sydney on 22 November.