

## **Entrepreneurship Education Goes from Niche to Mainstream in Universities**

**Irina Belsky**



*Entrepreneurship students at UNSW*

“The whole point of teaching entrepreneurship is to help students avoid some of the obvious mistakes, so they don't have to fail quite as often or quite as fast” says Dr. Martin Bliemel, the director of the UNSW Centre of Innovation and Entrepreneurship. It might seem odd to think that creativity and inventive thinking can be taught but entrepreneurship education in Australia is steadily growing.

Dr. Bliemel's insight into entrepreneurial education is certainly more reliable than most; after all, he has travelled the rocky road of entrepreneurship himself. Before joining UNSW from Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Dr. Bliemel completed an MBA with a venture specialisation in 2002. He reflects that while he was studying he could tell that “some [students] wanted to get into start ups and entrepreneurship but at that time there was only one course in entrepreneurship in that entire MBA program”. Consequently his desire to “help other people commercialize their cool ideas” propelled him to start a business consulting company that assisted entrepreneurs with business plans, raising capital and financial modeling. According to Dr. Bliemel “Its only recently we're starting to see education programs specialising in entrepreneurship”.

UNSW's Diploma in Innovation Management is one such program designed to filled this new niche in education. The undergraduate Diploma is offered in conjunction with students' undergraduate degrees and spans three years. Those willing to tackle extra study for the diploma have their chance to learn the secrets of entrepreneurial trade before graduating. Only the extremely brave, dedicated and ambitious take on the challenge but even before being accepted in the course, they are subjected to CIE's scrutinising eye and judged on the basis of past leadership and entrepreneurial skills, enthusiasm and academic achievement. The end result: a carefully chosen breed of motivated entrepreneur hopefuls. “The students are a lot more engaged and they learn a lot from each other. They're not taking [the course] because they have to, they take it because they want to.” Dr. Bliemel says proudly.

According to CIE's internal statistics 11% of students come from the College of Fine Arts, 14% are from the Faculty of Science, 24% are from the School of Business, 18% come from the Faculty of Social Science and 17% are from the Engineering Faculty. Dr. Bliemel says that there is also interest in the course from students in other universities. "They see that, 'Oh my God, I wish we had that at our university'".

What they might not be aware of is that entrepreneurship in education was being picked up as early as in 2004. According to the Journal of Asia Entrepreneurship and Sustainability, out of 39 Australian universities surveyed in 2004, 13 were offering entrepreneurship units in bachelor and masters programs, 8 offered bachelor programs in entrepreneurship with major or minor in entrepreneurship and 11 offered post graduate programs such as graduate certificate, diplomas or masters in entrepreneurship.

And the trend is gathering momentum. The Murdoch university for example, currently offers a specialization in entrepreneurship as part of its undergraduate commerce degree and is not shy to use lines like 'Love to be your own boss one day?' and 'you could be the world's next Richard Branson!' to entice students. The University of Adelaide has created an exclusively entrepreneurial undergraduate degree with the grand title 'Bachelor of Innovation and Entrepreneurship'. Taking a leaf from UNSW's book, UTS had recently created an Entrepreneurship Centre 'to build an entrepreneurship ecosystem' and aims to provide highly specialised courses for entrepreneurs.

Sean Marshall plans to give his own suggestions to the centre. After all he is the president of the Australian Collaborative Entrepreneurial Society (ACES) society at UTS and a fierce advocate for improvements in entrepreneurial education. His response to whether Australia is doing enough to assist young entrepreneurs speaks for itself. "Hell NO" he says with passion, "people need to know that entrepreneurship is a valid career path". Which is just what he's working on. A serial networker who goes to about four entrepreneurship networking events each week, he also runs The Vanguard, an organisation that helps encourage entrepreneurial skills in students. "We build a community of students from high school and university who want to be involved in entrepreneurship and run training events. For example a day work shop on how to build an e-commerce site" he says, before pausing for a moment to give the taxi driver directions. He is in fact on his way back from the 'Final Pitches' event at UNSW where entrepreneurship students showcase their innovative business ideas. "There needs to be a shift away from education focused on theory and to education that involves solving a problem in the real world" he concludes adamantly.

However Both Marshall and Bliemel are likely to be disappointed with Oliver Milman's cynicism about entrepreneurial courses. The editor of *Start Up Smart*, an online publication for entrepreneurs, is skeptical about the impact of tertiary education on the entrepreneurship sphere. "There is a big debate about whether entrepreneurship should be taught as a course. Rather, it's possible that its a state of mind." he comments pensively. "There is a belief that teaching entrepreneurship itself doesn't really help you out" he continues, "that you can't teach people to come up with ideas".

The experience of Sam Sidney, 24 year old owner of online clothing store *Twin Cat Vintage* seems to support his 'mind over matter' rationale. For Sam, who studied journalism at Melbourne University, lack of entrepreneurship education was simply a challenge to be tackled, not an insurmountable barrier.

“I particularly found the actual 'business' side of things tough. Being mathematically illiterate also didn't help matters!” she admits. But she is far from being resentful about this difficulty. “I think fear is a fantastic motivator and whilst there were always fears and stresses involved, I never lost the motivation to keep trying”.

She describes her love for vintage clothing and the satisfaction of giving people a “special shopping experience” as the reasons she started the business.

“I had an incredible long white 70's lace dress once, which a girl bought for her wedding dress - that was an amazing sale!”.



*Sam featuring on a page of her online vintage store*

When speaking about motivation, Fiona Anson, a serial entrepreneur who's owned a total of six businesses, has her own philosophy. “Entrepreneurs have an internal drive. They are motivated by doing things better.” she says with conviction.

Her newest venture *HireMeUp*, which she started with business partner Allison Baker, is a job search site for finding flexible work and attracts 10000 visitors per month. Like Sam, Fiona is optimistic about business challenges. “You might get a bit disappointed, but you pick yourself up and dust yourself off” she laughs, “it's all trial and error at the end of the day.”

Regardless of the role education plays in creating entrepreneurs, there is most certainly a growing demand for entrepreneurial courses in Australian universities. Yet the experiences and mentality of entrepreneurs like Fiona and Sam indicate that the desire to create something is what underpins the success of educational incentives.

“Somebody who's an entrepreneur gets the thrill out of finding something new to do all the time”, Fiona declares, before adding with a smile “and I love it.”



*Fiona (on the right) and her business partner Allison Baker*

## References

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