

Companies hungry for a BIT of talent

Students at UNSW are being headhunted before they finish their course

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LESS than four years out of Duval High School near the picturesque NSW town of Armidale, Richard Fleming, 21, is in his final year of a science degree in business information technology (BIT) at the University of NSW.

When he completes his degree he has a job lined up with Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu and says all of the other fourth-year students doing the course with him also have jobs, most of them arranged by last April.

Employer requests for BIT students flow regularly through the university's co-op program office, which administers the industry-funded scholarships that support the undergraduates.

"Some companies would skip us straight through interview rounds," Fleming says.

The BSc BIT course, introduced at UNSW in 1989, is a four-year degree program for which honours may be awarded.

The industry-linked education program draws on the disciplines of information systems, accounting and computer science.

The course combines the requirements for the award of the degree with 18 months of industrial experience at three sponsoring organisations.

Students spend 24 weeks at each organisation.

A scholarship is paid to students from funds donated by the sponsors.

From next year, scholarships will be worth \$13,400 annually. For students such as Fleming, the financial assistance has meant plenty.

"It would have been hard for my parents to put me up at a uni like this for four years.

"The scholarship has made it so much easier." Fleming recalls his interest in computing was sparked by a "really good computing teacher" he had in Year 10.

He found out about the BIT program later, in Year 12, through a careers adviser at Duval High School.

The unfortunate coincidence of the BIT program entrance interview with the traditional season of post-HSC partying did not deter Fleming. "I skipped schoolies for it," he says. "Now I'm pretty happy I did that."

According to Fleming, who has completed three industry placements, with Coca Cola Amatil, Telstra and IBM, the industry component of the course is invaluable. "You get to apply what you're learning while you're learning it," he says.

In his case, industry placements have sharpened an interest in outsourcing, a subject on which he intends to base his thesis.

They also set him up for the consulting job he scored at Deloitte.

As for his academic future, Fleming is trying for a Rhodes scholarship and confesses to dreams of getting to "a Harvard or Oxford one day".

Georgia Beverakis, 20, is a third year BIT student with a future in management on her mind. She says business application of IT interest her, as does network design.

"Throughout high school I was interested in IT and in Year 12, when I was looking at university courses my careers adviser suggested the co-op (BIT) program to me," she says.

Like Fleming, she is unstinting in her praise of the BIT program.

"I've been able to develop great relationships with the sponsors, professors, and some of my best friends are in this course because we work so closely together, and we're all striving for the same thing. The subjects have been great."

Beverakis has just started her second industry placement, with Telstra. Her first was with Arnotts. Beverakis also praises the camaraderie of the 25 or so students engaged in the BIT program: "If one person is in strife, another 10 will help out."

Professor Graham Low, head of the School of Information Systems, Technology and Management, has been involved with the BIT program since its introduction in 1989.

"Students get tremendous experience from it," he says of the BIT course. "They get good job offers and the employers and the sponsors regard them extremely highly."

Although it is focused on industry, some graduates of the course have joined the academic stream in the university.

"I've got one of my PhD students who did the BIT program, and probably graduated in the early 1990s," Low says.

Another ex-student is returning for postgraduate work next year, he says. Companies have supported the program since 1989.

Sponsors such as Telstra, Sydney Water, Macquarie Bank, Accenture, Oracle and Qantas IT are names that pepper the university's current list.

Students are selected for the course through academic ability, and a screening process that includes an interview with a panel comprised of academic and industry personnel.