Work experience? Priceless
Graduates who have tasted life beyond the lecture room are worth more to employers, writes Matthew Benns.

Six out of 10 employers are prepared to pay more money for business graduates who have more than nine months' work experience, a new survey has found.

“IT tells us that, although it is difficult to place over 1000 students a year into those nine-month posts, we are doing exactly what employers are looking for,” says the managing director of the International College of Management in Sydney, Frank Prestipino.

Prestipino commissioned the survey of 500 small, medium and large companies to make sure that his college (and the private education system generally) was giving both graduates and industry what they needed.

“Fifty-seven per cent of employers said that graduates with nine months' work experience made the best hires and 63 per cent said they would pay those people more money,” he says.

The survey also revealed that almost half of employers thought a “can do” attitude was the most important attribute in an employee, while 16 per cent rated a degree qualification.

Every one of the college's graduates found a nine-month work placement. “They come back and complete their degree with that rich learning of what it is like in the real world - the politics and hierarchies - things that you just cannot recreate in the classroom,” he says. “It influences all their subsequent work.”

Prestipino says running the college is equivalent to operating a medium-sized recruitment firm. “These are proper paid positions,” he says. “The only difference is that after nine months our placements come back to us to finish their degree.”

Well, most of them do. “Sometimes we get the call saying they have been offered more money and asked to stay on. Obviously you are happy for them but you want them to finish their qualification as well,” he says.

Private business colleges are aiming to provide job-ready graduates who do not require a long induction process.

The head of APM College of Business and Communication, David McDonald, says: “The new trend and real direction for private education providers like us is work-integrated learning. It is the integration of the academic program with the working environment so that we produce work-ready graduates in their area of discipline and knowledge.

“We consult very closely with industry on what are their needs and what sort of graduates they require. What we are finding is that companies are looking for people with the necessary knowledge, skills and behaviours to begin work immediately. Companies no longer want or have the time to put people through long induction programs.

“When we look at the things graduates have to have it is not only the academic knowledge but the ability to critically think about the environment, to apply that knowledge and to be able to do it. For example, a marketing student not only needs the theory behind it but also the ability to go into a company and actually come up with a marketing plan.”

The general manager of flexible and online learning for business educators the Think Education Group, Malcolm Kinns, says: “There is a definite growth in private education, partly because of the Bradley Review, which helped shape government...”
We sit somewhere between TAFE colleges, which are very applied, and universities, which are much more theoretical. We work very closely with industry to ensure students are graduating job-ready.

In the 2009 budget, the government announced an extra $5.4 billion to support higher education and research over four years in response to the Bradley Review. The review, by an emeritus professor from the University of South Australia, Denise Bradley, had called for greater funding and warned: "Australia is falling behind other countries in performance and investment in higher education."

The review also noted: "Our educational institutions and, in particular, our universities have built Australia’s third-largest export industry in the last two decades. A quarter of our higher-education students are from other countries and they make an enormous contribution to our economy, our relationships with the region and our demand for graduates."

But Kinns says some private colleges providing education to overseas students are struggling and unlikely to recover soon.

"Many private providers that relied heavily on international students have been adversely affected by the strong Australian dollar, changing regulations in terms of student visas and issues with ‘brand Australia’ following the various incidents involving Indian students studying in Melbourne and Sydney," he says.

Prestipino says the solution lies in allowing fully audited and accredited private education colleges to assist the government in speeding up the visa process.

"I don't think the higher dollar is a problem," he says. "Students can find a little extra money. The problem was the length of time it took to organise a visa."

Stylish start to a career in design

Crystal Wilkinson chose to study at the private Commercial Arts Training College in The Rocks, because it would give her a diploma in interior design in just one year.

"I wanted to get into the workforce as quickly as possible," she says.

The 26-year-old and her husband, Matthew, a Commonwealth Bank branch manager, moved to Sydney from Tamworth two years ago to give her a good chance to build a career in design.

"I have always been really passionate about design," she says.

The college has already helped her gain jobs as a designer. Wilkinson has worked as a stylist at Domayne furniture stores and helped style products for the Better Homes and Gardens magazine’s Christmas edition.

She was attracted to the college from the outset by its one-on-one training approach and focus on what employers want. The downside was the $17,000-a-year bill.

"The college is pushing my creativity," she says. "The four major projects throughout the year are things that go straight into your portfolio, which you present to employers and help you get a job."

Wilkinson found out she was pregnant while doing the course – but she hopes the focus in the training on setting yourself up as a freelance designer will allow her to do some paid design projects while based at home, before eventually finding a full-time job.

MB