



How Design Thinking is setting up students for success

La Trobe University's Innovation Challenge, now in its third year, is equipping students with the skills and attributes that employers look for in graduates.

Improving student employability is a core element of La Trobe University's strategy.

La Trobe University engaged a variety of industry partners, including Commonwealth Bank, to determine what skills and attributes they seek in graduates, culminating in the development of the Career Ready Advantage program. Through ongoing engagement with other stakeholders including students, employers and academic staff over two years, the program formally launched in July 2017. Career Ready helps students develop the appropriate skills by participating in online courses, work placements, volunteering and workshops.

Picture: Winners of the La Trobe University Commonwealth Bank Innovation Challenge, Kieren Bramham and Kevin Zhang with Fred Kinsman, Senior Associate, IB&M Commonwealth Bank at the Innovation Lab in Sydney (from L-R, Fred, Kieren, Kevin).

Problem-solving in multi-disciplinary teams...

One of the program's events is the Commonwealth Bank Innovation Challenge. Interested students register on an online platform and the university selects 24 students and splits them into six teams. Students come from a variety of disciplines spanning Arts, Engineering, HR, IT, Marketing and Science.

The challenge starts with a session where the students meet each other and are introduced to Design Thinking, an approach to designing solutions that Commonwealth Bank uses as part of its innovation process. The teams then commence a two-day Design Jam that is facilitated by Commonwealth Bank staff. Each team works together on one of three problem statements important to the university. Staff from the university and Commonwealth Bank act as mentors and sounding boards.



Each team ideates and prototypes ideas on day one. The following day each team focuses on pitching skills, culminating in the presentation of each team's idea to the panel of judges – four from the university and one from the bank.

The winning team receives a cash prize from Commonwealth Bank and time in the Sydney Innovation Lab. The prize also provides entry to the La Trobe Accelerator Program, a 12-week start-up program to build Victoria's regional entrepreneurial ecosystem.

...and so much more...

Scott Harding, Senior Coordinator – Employer Engagement, at La Trobe University, says students found the Innovation Challenge both fun and hard work. *“They really enjoyed the Design Thinking process and working in multidisciplinary teams,”* he says. As one student puts it: *“It's great to work with fellow students from different backgrounds and learn their perspectives on the topic.”*

Beyond problem-solving, the Challenge teaches students other valuable workplace skills such as resilience, collaboration and apportioning responsibilities. *“So it is building those skills that the Career Ready program is designed to build – team work, funnelling ideas, negotiating and building relationships with complete strangers,”* explains Scott.

“They really did enjoy speaking to, and hearing the perspectives of, the different mentors from Commonwealth Bank,” he adds. *“They got insights into what those roles would look like.”*



Picture: Kieren presenting his pitch to the judging panel.

...particularly collaboration

Collaboration has always been an important skill, *“but even more so now, being able to work together in the face of technological change and regulatory change,”* says Scott. *“You can't take a siloed approach.”* Indeed, based on student feedback, this year's Challenge may put more emphasis on team building skills.

Employers really value people who take time out to develop skills. Being able to speak to prospective employers about participating in events like the La Trobe University Commonwealth Bank Innovation Challenge gives students a point of difference in interviews when competing against colleagues and students from other universities.

