

Working with the Shopfront program: bringing together students, academics and community organisations

Most academics would agree that students gain huge benefits and growth from opportunities to apply their skills in 'real life' professional settings, and that potential employers are also looking for this practical experience in new graduates. However, tutors and subject coordinators don't always have the time and resources to establish and manage the relationships with organisations to facilitate these experiences.

The UTS Shopfront program can assist academics to create these practical learning opportunities for students. Shopfront works by connecting not for profit organisations with UTS students in a mutually beneficial arrangement in which students work on 'real life' projects for not for profit organisations that have limited resources.

Amanda*, who is a tutor partnering with Shopfront to give her students the opportunity to work with a not for profit training organisation that needed their help to develop the visual language and content for their new online training modules.

The partnership with Shopfront complemented the academic course development. Whilst Amanda focused on the curriculum and disciplinary aspect of the subject, the Shopfront team provided scaffolded support around developing the partnership and framing the brief with the NGO in order to make it subject ready.

Although close to 95% of Shopfront partnered projects run without a glitch, from time to time there is a hiccup. This is also where Shopfront steps in to ensure the subject can run smoothly and maintain its deliverables.

This was the case with Amanda's story. While Amanda felt her students benefitted enormously from the collaboration and produced an outstanding product for the client, the journey of students and the community organisation working together did not come without its challenges. She was grateful that the Shopfront team not only facilitated the initiation of the partnership but provided support and structure to keep it on track.

"While students are highly motivated to work on 'real life projects' and are experts in their field, they can lack workplace experience are not aware of the conventions and language of the workplace and how to overcome any misunderstandings that may arise," Amanda said.

“And while community organisations are very excited to get the support of students to work on projects that they would not have been able to do otherwise, they can have expectations that students will just jump in and do the work for them. They may be less aware of the approach we take to problem solving where students are guided to first step back and interrogate the brief and ask if there’s a better way it could be done.” Other times there may be a communication challenges as students and clients, informed by their own disciplinary background, almost speak a different language.

For example, as they were working through the design process, Amanda’s students determined that what was needed in response to the client’s brief was an animation. However, the client was asking for a ‘toolkit.’

“The directive of being asked for a ‘toolkit’ made the students think that the client wasn’t going to allow them to push the boundary and was asking them to do something they felt was not the right answer, and they were really upset by it,” Amanda said.

To resolve the situation Shopfront facilitated a meeting in the second week of the term between the students, tutor and client.

“Through this process we created the space to quickly solve the problem before it escalated. Through the conversation the students could see that the client was more than happy for them to push the boundary – they were just using different language. We learned that the requested “toolkit” was a document that provided guidance so that into the future, so they could make more animations beyond what the students were doing.”

“This was a really successful outcome. Not only did the students deliver on what was expected, the organisation then employed the students after they had completed the subject to continue and build on the work they had done.”

*Name changed