

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

Although many students complete their degrees without ever being exposed to a real-world professional setting, there is a growing consensus that a university education can and must provide students with opportunities to apply their skills to real problems dealt with by real organisations.

By connecting not-for-profit organisations with UTS students, the UTS Shopfront program creates a mutually beneficial arrangement in which students get an opportunity to gain practical experience while lending their skills to people like Clare*, who works for a domestic violence organisation with limited resources.

Again... while %% of projects are delivered without a glitch, the nature of the live project means that problems can occur. Shopfront takes up a support role in these instances to ensure that the best outcome is delivered for all stakeholders.

While Clare was happy with the outcomes of the collaboration, the journey of working with students did not come without its challenges and she was grateful for the support she received from the Shopfront team throughout the journey.

“While the students are highly trained in their field of expertise, for most of them, this is their first experience with a ‘real life’ project in a ‘real life’ workplace, rather than an assignment they have to complete for their tutor,” Clare said.

“They may be used to their tutor having a lot of availability for them at short notice, whereas when they are working with a community organisation, the staff will likely have limited availability and may not have capacity to give immediate feedback or mentorship.”

The Shopfront team work to prevent any issues arising from this by establishing clear communication channels and clear expectations of the roles of all parties involved.

“There were several groups working on different components of our brief and while the majority were in contact with me regularly, one group did not get in touch the whole first half of the semester. I didn’t realise this was a requirement as this was a student project and I assumed that these things just happen!”

During the mid-semester check-in with Shopfront, Clare was informed that by not consulting with her, that particular group of students was at risk of presenting a finished product that did not respond to her brief, as well as missing out on the experience of regular communication and feedback from a client.

“To resolve the situation Shopfront quickly convened a meeting between me, the students and the tutor to make up for lost ground. They presented to me their work so far, and I was able to give them feedback and have a role in their final work that was presented at the end of the semester.”

“Despite students being less experienced in the workplace, they are very motivated to complete projects to a high standard and can often provide a fresh perspective and come up with innovative solutions.

Ultimately, Clare was very happy with the work produced by the whole cohort of students and felt supported by the Shopfront team who are experienced in managing the relationship for best project outcomes.

“The work produced by the overall cohort was very strong. They came up with a number of options for me to consider in creating a new revenue stream for the organisation which we have been able to pursue.”

*Name changed

