



Toe-in-the-water jobs aim to keep science students focused

Lynnette Hoffman

WHEN University of Technology Sydney applied chemistry student Anthony Ogle heard about a chance to work in a “real lab” for a couple months over the Christmas holidays last year, he figured he may as well apply, get some experience and put the break to good use. It turned out to be a wise decision.

What began as a two-month contract testing water and soil samples at The National Measurement Institute ended with a job offer. Ogle deferred uni for six months to continue working at the lab. The forensic science major says the paid, full-time work was the first opportunity he had had to really put the skills he'd learned in the classroom into practice.

“I was given a lot of responsibility, particularly during the times when my adviser wasn't there, so it built up my confidence to know what I could do,” Ogle says. “In university you follow everything line by line, but in the real world if something goes wrong you've got to figure it out for yourself. I also got a feeling for how a laboratory is run and how a business operates, which I really didn't get from the course.”

It wasn't all pure bliss. Some parts of the job were very repetitive, but overall Ogle says the experience was definitely worthwhile. The position also afforded lots of opportunity to meet key people within the industry and develop contacts. And Ogle will be back working at NMI again this summer, this time gaining in experience in a different area of the institute.

“It's a great opportunity to do something productive over the holidays rather than just sitting around and playing video games or whatever,” he says.

Ogle landed the initial position through a new initiative called the Future Scientists program, launched by human resources organisation Kelly Scientific Resources late last year in an effort to help redress the skills shortage of chemists in Australia.

Kelly Scientific Resources director Anne Sabine says the program aims to reduce the drop-out rate among science students, and steer them toward careers in the industry once they graduate.

“Many students enter a science degree, but the task is to keep them there,” Sabine says. “This program helps to give students knowledge about the industry, paid work-experience and industry contacts — all factors that will help students decide on their future and find employment.”

Not only that, but it will also help produce more job-ready graduates who have a better understanding of what will be required once they enter the workforce.

“There's a gap between what universities produce and what the industry is actually looking for — undergraduate courses often focus more on research with not as much



Confidence building: Anthony Ogle

practical experience or training in using specific instruments or techniques that they will need. This is a way of helping to close that gap and give students a more realistic idea of what they can expect,” Sabine says.

The Future Scientists program was launched first in Sydney and has now kicked off in Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide. It is open to second- and third-year and honours chemistry students who are keen for more hands-on experience. All positions are paid and either short-term or part-time — for example, some positions are scheduled for university breaks, while others are spread out one or two days each week over a semester.

So far there's been a keen interest among students, with far more applicants than positions available. Only about a quarter of applicants have gone on to land a spot at one of the six companies currently on board, though Sabine says even the screening process itself is valuable, with students gaining skills and feedback on their interview and application. She says the organisation expects to place about 40 students this year.

Positions are all laboratory based, in a number of diverse industries ranging from pharmaceutical to environmental to food to chemical, with both government and private sector represented. Sabine says discussions are under way with a number of other organisations to broaden the scope even further. Ultimately the Future Scientists Program will likely be expanded to include other areas of science with significant shortages — particularly biotechnology and environmental science, Sabine says.

While the program is new to Australia, it's been going strong in the US for eight years and employers are reaping the benefits, with 60 per cent of students returning to the same employer after they complete their work experience, Sabine says.

Kelly Scientific has partnered with University of Technology Sydney, the University of Queensland, Monash University, Flinders University and the University of Western Australia, but students at other universities can still apply for the program by contacting Kelly Services in their city.