

The Australian

Australian Technology Network calls for paid interns

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IN the wake of the Business Council of Australia's call last week for greater engagement with universities, the group of technology universities has said it will resuscitate a proposal for a paid student internship program.

Under the proposal, which has previously failed to gain traction from the business community, companies receive tax credits for taking on interns.

The idea is based on a successful Canadian program.

Jeanette Hacket, chair of the Australian Technology Network of universities, said such a program would help deliver the generic graduate skills business is looking for, such as teamwork, the ability to negotiate and creative problem solving.

Professor Hacket said she supported calls for greater engagement between universities and the business community, but said business could be difficult to get on board.

"It is obviously a two-way process," she said. "Business and industry do need to be more proactive, but there is a role for both government and universities to facilitate that process."

The ATN proposal is modelled on the Canadian University of Waterloo's co-operative education model in which students can spend a full term -- or four months -- doing paid work in a relevant business or industry. To encourage business participation, the Ontario government offers eligible employers an associated tax credit.

The University of Waterloo has more than 13,000 students enrolled in the program across three terms.

RMIT has run a small pilot taking four University of Waterloo students on work experience in Australia.

The ATN believes the model would work equally well for Australian students.

It is lobbying for the idea to be considered seriously by universities and the BCA.

"It is an educational model that provides for the formal integration of academic studies with relevant work experience," Professor Hacket said.

It has been suggested that engineering would provide an ideal discipline to trial the program in Australia. In Canada students involved in the program tend to be concentrated in engineering, computer science and

accounting. However, 20 per cent of Waterloo's arts students and 31 per cent of its science students are also enrolled in the program.

In its higher education policy released last week, the BCA called for more targeted curriculums and increased focus on generic skills.

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