

UTS Big Ideas: Social Impact Hackathon

Project lead: Professor Kathy Walsh, Dr Mihalja Gavin(UTS Business School); Alex Connor (UTS SOUL Award, Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion)

External partners: The Big Issue

1. Summary of impact

The Big Ideas Social Impact Hackathon resulted in a series of student project pitches focused on social enterprise opportunities for marginalised people. This event, which was open to students from across UTS, provided participants with critical learning about the role of business in driving meaningful social change. This work reflects the UTS Business School's ethos of providing business education that prepares students to become ethical, equitable, and socially just practitioners. It received the Teaching and Learning Award at the 2023 UTS Business School Achievement Awards and a 2022 UTS Vice-Chancellor's Professional Staff Excellence Group Commendation.

2. The problem

The global business sector is implicated in many of the social challenges facing the world today. Transforming the role of business from a capitalist endeavour to a discipline concerned with public value and social purpose requires the development of innovative, strategic, and human-centred learning and engagement opportunities that have the power to influence business practice. University business schools offer an unparalleled opportunity to deliver these opportunities to a captive audience of future business leaders.

3. Beneficiaries

UTS students engaged with an innovative, hands-on learning opportunity that challenged them to apply their business, planning, and pitching skills to a real-world social enterprise. University staff from the UTS Business School and the Centre for Social Justice & Inclusion built strong collaborative networks as a result of partnering on this project. The Hackathon was supported by industry partner The Big Issue, who benefitted from the opportunity to engage with student ideas and to expand their university connections. Further, The Big Issue's guest speakers — people with lived experience of homelessness — were invited to share their stories and were remunerated for their work.

4. Approach to impact

The UTS Business School has a growing public profile as an institution committed to the idea of 'business for good'. In partnership with the UTS Centre for Social Justice & Inclusion, and homelessness charity The Big Issue Australia, a team at the UTS Business School hosted a cross-disciplinary, two-day Social Impact Hackathon for 47 UTS students.

The Hackathon challenged students to develop a concept for a social enterprise that would create positive social change, specifically employment opportunities, for people who have experienced disadvantage or marginalisation in Australian society. Student projects covered a number of important areas, such as providing employment opportunities for homeless people, helping newly arrived refugees and asylum seekers, designing programs to upskill migrants, supporting education for young people in juvenile detention, and re-skilling older workers.

Students were invited to hear guest lectures from The Big Issue team, as well as presentations from a panel of speakers with lived experience of homelessness. These presentations formed the basis for students' subsequent social enterprise project ideas, which they developed in teams and pitched to a guest panel of experts from academia, industry and the not-for-profit sector. The winning pitch was for a business designed to equip marginalised people with public speaking skills, preparing them for paid opportunities to contribute to corporate diversity, inclusion and social impact initiatives.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

As a result of attending the Hackathon, students reported significant increases to their knowledge of key social issues and gained confidence in applying their business expertise to social impact projects. In a post-event survey, 96 per cent of Hackathon participants reported having a better understanding of social enterprise after attending the event, while 85 per cent reported increased awareness of social disadvantage and an understanding of how to create new ideas to address social challenges. Eighty-one per cent reported an increase in their business project, planning and pitching skills. Additionally, students felt that the Hackathon's experiential learning focus equipped them with important professional skills, including collaboration (96 per cent), teamwork (93 per cent) and problem solving (81 per cent).

The Hackathon also set an exciting precedent for the inclusion of lived experience perspectives in business education at UTS. While lived experience participation is common in health and related disciplines, its presence in business learning contexts remains limited. Students gained important insights from the lived experience panel that reshaped their understanding of the causes of social disadvantage and the needs and experiences of people who had experienced homelessness. Collectively, the Hackathon outcomes have equipped students with knowledge that will prepare them to become more compassionate professionals who can deploy their knowledge to deliver human-centric business solutions.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

The Hackathon was supported by a UTS Social Impact Grant and matched funding from the UTS Business School; infrastructure and resource support from the UTS SOUL program; and the donation of time and expertise from UTS professional staff, student volunteers and guest judges from industry. The grant funding was used to compensate The Big Issue for their time and resources and to remunerate the panel of people with lived experience.

7. Challenges

The costs associated with developing resources for the Hackathon weren't adequately captured in the program budget. Despite this, the project leads provided the hours and materials required to ensure the event went ahead.