

Shanghai is considered to be China's premier business city and all of its universities offer courses and workshops in entrepreneurship.
Photo: AFP



What's the big idea?

School courses aim to cultivate entrepreneurship, but can it actually be taught, asks **Lim Hui Sin**

Are entrepreneurs born or can they be cultivated? Wherever you stand on the debate, there is growing interest in programmes that give young people some grounding in the realities of starting a business – not least because the experience may just help them nail a job in an increasing competitive world.

Although usually designed for university students, the programmes are now being extended to the high school level.

Last year Next Step Connections, a company specialising in customised professional internships, launched a programme in Shanghai aimed at participants aged between 15 and 19. These internships had an entrepreneurial focus. Three more high school students started about a week ago, and another batch are expected to start next month.

Students live on the campus of Donghua University, where they attend business classes twice a week. They also receive 12 hours of lessons in Mandarin. During the three-week stay, they are introduced to business

professionals, who teach them about such topics as product development and marketing.

Each intern presents a business proposal to a panel of entrepreneurs at the end of the programme. They also work at a local business.

"The students get to see how to set up a business and learn what is involved. It gives them a feel of what it's like to be an entrepreneur in Shanghai," says Len Hayashi, a co-founder of Next Step Connections.

Hayashi, a US citizen, says he was never taught to be an entrepreneur. Business is in his genes: "My father's an entrepreneur, too, so that seed was planted." But the former marketing executive reckons that entrepreneurship programmes can play an important role.

"The idea is that programmes like this provide ideas, a network, some support, and they help people to realise their plans," Hayashi says.

"It's a bit of a challenge for young people to get out of the comfort zone, because schooling before university pushes students to achieve things. But entrepreneurs have to do everything by themselves.

This sort of self-sufficiency is not taught in school."

Pat McCombs, who signed up for Next Step's entrepreneurial internship last year, thoroughly embraced the concept. He worked with Kelley Lee, a Shanghai-based restaurateur, on marketing, market research, event planning, business development and operations for four of her businesses.

After returning to the US, McCombs quickly applied what he had learned.

Earlier this year, he and a friend launched a crêperie catering to students at Albion College in Michigan, where McCombs was studying. Called Makin' Crêpes, it took off immediately.

"We received initial funding from the college as a loan to get us off the ground, and we paid that back within the first week," says McCombs, now 22. "We generated US\$20,000 in sales over a three-month period, and the students really loved the place."

McCombs attributes much of their success to his experience in Shanghai. "My internship was very

helpful in guiding me," he says.

"Kelley gave me some guidance before I left Shanghai because I told her about my plans. She gave me some pointers on how to project sales and prepare for the launch. All that was really useful information."

The experience also taught him about personal development. McCombs says he learned to make changes, surround himself with the right people and even have fun running a business. "I made sure that I was ready to be flexible when it was necessary," he says.

Shanghai is the mainland's premier business city, so it is not



The courses show you what can be achieved rather than teach you how to become an entrepreneur

MARK SECCHIA, BUSINESSMAN

surprising that all its universities offer courses and workshops in entrepreneurship. Since 2009, the Shanghai Administrative Office of Industry and Commerce has introduced measures to boost entrepreneurship among university students. These include the provision of loans and removing the minimum capital requirement to start a registered business. It may go some way towards alleviating graduate unemployment, which state media reported had exceeded 25 per cent last year.

Despite having participated in several youth programmes that

brought him into contact with foreign and Chinese students, Shanghai-based businessman Mark Secchia remains sceptical about teaching entrepreneurship. He reckons it was his father who gave him the drive and appetite for risk needed to launch a business.

A speaker at last month's Junior World Entrepreneurship Forum organised by French business school EMLYON and auditing agency KPMG in the city, Secchia says that mainland students seem more receptive to the idea of setting up their own businesses.

"From what I saw, the Chinese students already want to do it. It's usually their parents who want them to work in a big company, for stability and status," he says.

When Secchia first arrived in Shanghai 15 years ago, he decided to earn an MBA to learn about business and corporate structures on the mainland. It was while pursuing his studies that he developed a plan to start Sherpa's, his restaurant home delivery service.

"But I would say that most people who become entrepreneurs already want to do it. Programmes like this give entrepreneurship legitimacy. They show you what can be achieved, rather than actually teaching you how to be an entrepreneur," Secchia says.

McCombs agrees. "I've always wanted to start my own business, ever since I was young," he says.

He embarked on his first business venture in 2006, building custom equipment for lawn games. His latest effort has fuelled his ambitions. "We're hoping to launch a few more crêperies in different college campus locations in the US," McCombs says.
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Next Step Connections offers students (above) an entrepreneurship programme in Shanghai, which includes placement at local businesses such as the Boxing Cat restaurant (left)