



# Learn to live

**Group Colleges Australia prides itself on having entrepreneurial flair, a key differentiator from other players in the higher-education sector.**

IMAGES SCOTT EHLLER

**A**lan Manly is a passionate entrepreneur. He has more than thirty years of experience in the technology and education industries, and this bank of knowledge has culminated in the foundation of Group Colleges Australia (GCA) — a range of training institutions that ten years ago was expanded to include the Universal Business School Sydney (UBSS) MBA program in order to support the next wave of Australia's entrepreneurs.

"I really like seeing students get it, knowing that they too can be an entrepreneur," shares Alan, who is also GCA's CEO. "I believe you can be an entrepreneur in all sorts of ways. And the freedom that comes with being an entrepreneur can take people away from what might be a pretty ordinary background and into a career they can flourish in and do things they are excited about. It's wonderful to see people when they finish a course with UBSS, because you can just tell that they're going to go out and do some things they maybe weren't brave enough to do before. It's almost like a freedom ticket. You see the most unlikely people with the greatest or wildest ideas; they might be physically or personally diminutive, yet you can see there is a tiger waiting to unleash itself on the world. That's a lot of fun." >>

**GCA**

**Name** Alan Manly  
**Company** Group Colleges Australia  
**Position** Founder and CEO  
**HQ** Sydney, Australia  
**Employees** 100+



Alan states that his story is not dissimilar to those of the students who attend his college; he too had somewhat of an ordinary background before he found his entrepreneurial spark. His professional career started as a computer engineer, working for a large US-based company. From there, he progressed into the position of a marketing manager before being attracted to a computer college that taught programming. “Some people would probably say that it was at that time that I suffered an ‘entrepreneurial seizure,’” Alan says with a smile. “I had a perfectly good corporate job but I wanted something more.”

Having learned a little bit about teaching and educating people through his work with the computer programming college, he quickly noticed that the majority of students followed a similar pattern when it came to their higher-education journey. He observed three key things: people would typically do a certificate, a diploma, and then a degree; the education industry was staid; and there was no difference between how high-school and university students were treated.

“I concluded that what the country needed was a group of colleges that would address those various issues, rather than just the one. I also thought that a private organisation could treat students as customers, rather than using the traditional student-teacher discourse.”

The idea for GCA was set. Alan subsequently launched the college with high-end technology in place to deal with the administration side of things, thus resulting in no enrolment queues as everything was done online. “We developed one of the more-advanced online student management systems there is, probably the best out of any

private college. That was the biggest opportunity I saw: to make technology a differentiator for GCA.”

He quickly recognised that having short queues couldn’t be the only selling point. GCA needed to offer something more than just an efficient and highly automated back office. The front office operations were important too, so GCA needed to have a great product offering.

“For several years now, we’ve had the MBA, or Master of Business Administration, through our member company UBSS,” Alan says. “We promote that as an entrepreneur’s MBA, and we’re not the only ones to do that; I’m sure if you look it up, there are dozens of colleges that have the same claim. However, our difference is that UBSS was founded and is managed by an entrepreneur — which is my good self. Other MBA courses are delivered by government-owned entities. If you are to compare an institution run by a government department with one that might have the soul of an entrepreneur, there’s a pretty obvious differentiator there. That’s what we wish to promote at UBSS.”

Alan notes that GCA’s role is to be a disruptor in an industry which is traditionally quite mature and bureaucratic. “When we talk to new staff, we often say our culture is more like Virgin than like Qantas. We are the disruptor. We have really efficient student management systems; we can make decisions quickly; and we don’t let endless committees rule over us. The marketplace in Australia is very much staid, and that’s putting it kindly. GCA’s culture offers some relief: we are very entrepreneurial and innovative.”

As well as having UBSS and its MBA course, GCA has three other members in its consortium: the Australian Institute of Workplace Learning,



Central College, and Metro English College. To serve the group in the most efficient way, Alan says, collaboration with other businesses and organisations is crucial. One thing it likes to do is to network with business executives, and this is done in several forums, including with the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry. GCA invites the Chamber’s members to sit in and review student presentations so that they can give constructive feedback and advice, and executive evenings are held to share stories of success. “You really have to stay connected,” Alan states. “You have to stay networked and you have to stay connected if you want to make the most of opportunities.”

Alan is more than happy to share his own story too. In fact, he has just released his second book, *The Unlikely Entrepreneur*, which outlines his



personal path to success. Born and raised in a small country town, he dropped out of school in Year 9 and became a postman: “Hardly an auspicious beginning to a career,” he quips. “Who would have thought I

would end up as the owner and founder of an MBA college in Sydney?

“There are an awful lot of people out there who are thinking about being entrepreneurs and they wonder if they

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could do it. I thought this book might give them faith and let them know that there are many entrepreneurs who are unlikely successes.

“*The Unlikely Entrepreneur* talks of my career as an entrepreneur and elaborates on some of the minor successes and a few of the messy failures I have experienced. It covers my career, from working for a US-based company to undertaking an executive MBA course, and how that changed my life. Then we flash forward to many years later — more than thirty, in fact — to me running UBSS.”

The book also includes the details about a significant chapter in Alan’s life which he has previously outlined in *When There Are Too Many Lawyers ... There Is No Justice*. This was the topic of his first book, which goes into detail about his decade-long legal dispute over a mere \$115 which took on a life of its own, involving every court in the country including the High Court of Australia. It has received rave reviews from the NSW Law Society. “I wrote that book for cathartic reasons,” Alan notes. “It’s ten years in an entrepreneur’s life that was distracted. It was a devastating period of time for myself and for my family.

“My new book is less intense. It’s the same person, except the subject is a mile off: it’s all about the entrepreneur.” ■