



# **Lifebridge**

## INSTITUTE

Prospectus Draft, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 2021

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## Aim

LifeBridge is a volunteer non-profit organisation that will provide professional development support for engineers and other professionals seeking employment, including migrants, recent graduates who have been unable to find paid work, and experienced professionals laid off because of economic disruptions.

LifeBridge will work with local companies who employ engineers and allied professionals to provide internship and employment opportunities and accelerate the professional development of engineers.

LifeBridge builds on two decades of world-leading research at The University of Western Australia on engineering practice.

## Current Status

A group of West Australian businesses founded LifeBridge with the aim of improving the capabilities and career prospects of engineering and business graduates.

The founders incorporated LifeBridge as a non-profit organisation in Western Australia at the start of 2021. The first intake of participants is February 2021 (depending on public health restrictions).

## How LifeBridge Works

LifeBridge participants comprise (initially):

- a) Students enrolled at West Australian engineering or business schools (or graduates) looking for internship or employment opportunities;
- b) Early career graduates looking for internship or employment opportunities, or already employed and interested in accelerating their professional development.
- c) Engineers who are under- or unemployed who are interested in developing new career opportunities;
- d) Mentors – experienced engineers or business people willing to help younger professionals as volunteer mentors and educators.

On joining, participants become members of LifeBridge. They commit to purchasing a modestly priced (<\$50) package of educational materials (including “Learning Engineering Practice” by James Trevelyan) and making conscientious efforts to participate in LifeBridge programmes.

Three programmes are planned:

- 1) Career preparation programme for students, graduates and engineer participants seeking internship or employment opportunities;
- 2) LifeBridge internship programme for students, graduates and engineers in which they work collaboratively on representative industry projects.
- 3) Sponsored internship programme for students, graduates, and engineers. They work on projects for a commercial or government sponsor that pays appropriate commercial fees for the work to be performed.

## Career preparation programme

Participants looking for internship or employment opportunities participate in a structured career preparation program that consists of:

- a) Acquiring relevant perception skills, including listening, note-taking, reading, emotional literacy, and visual perception.
- b) Constructing appropriate resumé and supporting online professional profile.
- c) Network building activity – participants research engineering component and service suppliers in their area of interest or expertise and arrange to visit these companies to build their knowledge of suppliers and, in doing so, expand their professional networks.
- d) Building knowledge on appropriate standards, engineering industries in Western Australia, local regulations (e.g. Occupational Health and Safety), and local costs for generic activities such as construction and civil works.

The career preparation program runs for eight weeks with weekly review meetings. Ideally (though this depends on attracting engineers or mentors with appropriate skills) each group of 8-10 students and graduates would be supervised and coached by one engineer or mentor. Participants will meet at a venue such as a conveniently located hotel or restaurant where they can order refreshments and a meal and use a quiet meeting space for coaching.

#### Participant benefits

- i) Access to informal (or hidden) job market, usually much larger than the formally advertised job market.
- ii) Participants progressively improve their employability by participating in the programme.
- iii) Improved likelihood of securing paid employment or internship position.
- iv) Participants will be more valuable for their employers as a result of participation with widely applicable skills and knowledge.

#### LifeBridge internship programme

Students and graduates will work under the supervision of engineers and mentors to perform industry-relevant project work. LifeBridge has access to office accommodation at which the students and mentors will perform the work, most likely on a part-time basis, so the accommodation spaces can be shared.

LifeBridge provides a professional work setting for participants. In essence, they work together as an unpaid consultancy firm on real industrial projects waiting for appropriate finance, in an appropriately equipped office space. The office operates as a co-working space: participants contribute a modest monthly fee towards the running cost. Experienced participants, under guidance from the founders, provide supervision and training to graduates. Both groups build their skills and knowledge together, creating sufficient capacity to pass on new knowledge to others. Some of the participants will gain employment, and new participants will enter the programme.

Engineers and mentors will source documentation from client organisations, such as local engineering companies, on recently completed (or ongoing) projects through their professional networks. Sensitive information (commercial or classified) is removed, changed or redacted. The University of WA Engineering School uses this model for industry design projects. It is well-established and successful and requires relatively insignificant client organisation involvement (unless the client desires more).



*Lifebridge founder John Houdalakis (far right) with students working on geothermal engineering installation at Murdoch University.*

Students and graduates then produce appropriate project documents and presentations as if employed as engineers or professionals, emulating professional standards.

Participants should have their own mobile phone and laptop computer: this is a reasonable requirement today. LifeBridge will operate collaboration software such as Bitrix and may require participants to install appropriate software to protect against distributing malicious software code.

Students and at least some graduates will still have access to specialised software tools through the institution where they completed their degrees. In some cases, it will be possible for the client organisation to provide access.

As students and graduates gain employment, new participants take their places.

Intellectual property (copyright and other forms) remains with the originating participants under this programme.

As engineers and mentors learn teaching skills, they also contribute to a written and recorded body of knowledge in the form of books, video lectures, podcasts and other media covering topics such as:

- a) Industry standards and how they are used;
- b) Methods for building perception skills – listening, reading documents, reading people, and visual perception;
- c) Methods for identifying and navigating organisational culture;

- d) Methods for building personal networks of specialist product and service suppliers;
- e) Specialised technical collaboration practices used in firms;
- f) How professional activities generate commercial value, and how financial decision-making influences professional activities.

#### Participant benefits

Students and graduates acquire industry-relevant capabilities as well as expanding their professional networks, gradually improving their employability.

#### Client organisation benefits

Client organisations have the opportunity to evaluate participants as potential hires.

Client organisations also have access to insights gained for seeing recent projects performed by a group of outsiders, possibly revealing novel insights and solutions.

#### Sponsored internship programme

In principle, this internship programme operates in the same way as the LifeBridge internship programme with several significant differences:

- a) The sponsoring organisation, in most instances, will provide a current project, typically one for which funding is not yet available;
- b) The sponsoring organisation will generally require participants to agree to a confidentiality agreement;
- c) The sponsoring organisation will retain (at its discretion) all intellectual property created in the programme;
- d) The sponsoring organisation will reimburse reasonable expenses incurred by the project participants;
- e) The sponsoring organisation may, at its discretion, rent space from LifeBridge specifically for the project team to operate in; and
- f) The sponsoring organisation will pay LifeBridge an agreed service fee as a contribution to LifeBridge's running costs.

## Institutional Partnerships

LifeBridge will build partnerships with key stakeholders

#### Education Institutions

LifeBridge will work with education institutions and Engineers Australia to gain recognition for its internship programmes as a means to satisfy student needs for exposure to professional practice. In this way student participants will be able to graduate with a LifeBridge internship as their exposure to professional practice.

Continuing research at UWA and other universities on education to employment transitions will enable the LifeBridge programme to be strengthened and, in time, replicated in other Australian states, even internationally.

#### Professional Organisations

LifeBridge is collaborating with Engineers Australia to develop career development opportunities for engineering students and graduates, even mid-career engineers. The learning materials that LifeBridge will use were prepared originally to help engineers satisfy the requirements for chartered

status, a prerequisite for professional registration in Queensland (with other states introducing similar schemes).

### Australian Institute of Management (AIM)

LifeBridge will work with AIM to develop effective career development courses for business students and graduates, building on the work already done for engineers.

### Western Australian Government

LifeBridge has met with WA government officials concerned with technological workforce development. LifeBridge will be contributing significantly to professional workforce development in WA.

### Australian Government Agencies

Once operating, LifeBridge will build links with relevant Australian government departments which have interests in developing workforce capabilities and assisting business develop their capacity for growth.

### Engineering employers

LifeBridge will be developing strong relationships with firms that employ engineers and business professionals. These firms will be approached for project opportunities, sponsored internships and other forms of collaboration.

## How LifeBridge helps with employment and social cohesion

In LifeBridge, participants learn to build personal networks and knowledge to access opportunities in the informal employment market, typically 80% – 90% of jobs, also through advertised positions. Few participants are aware of these techniques when they start. LifeBridge activities also boost their employability, increasing the chances of success in applying for employment.

#### 1. Local business engagement

A group of small Perth businesses in the engineering and resources industry created LifeBridge. The participants will engage with these and other companies, working on projects for those businesses.

#### 2. Mentors

Experienced members mentor engineers, graduates and students to improve employability and career prospects.

#### 3. Diverse Groups

Many of the LifeBridge participants will be migrants and have culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds.

#### 4. Needs Analysis

LifeBridge was created because the needs were already apparent to the founders. January 2021 estimates suggest there were approximately 2,000 students and graduates seeking internship positions in WA. Data collected from local universities and Engineers Australia provided further evidence on the need for this initiative.

## LifeBridge Benefits

LifeBridge provides significant benefits to its participants and collaborating companies.

Students and graduates acquire critical networking and job-seeking skills, professional knowledge, perception skills, and collaborative working skills that are seldom even mentioned in universities. Particularly in engineering, few if any teaching staff have extensive professional work experience, so LifeBridge can help make up for that weakness. In fact, the individual grading practices intrinsic to formal education tend to inhibit even the realisation among graduates that their future depends on collaborative, interdependent work. LifeBridge provides a much more conducive environment for participants to change their outlook and start acquiring collaborative work skills.

Experienced LifeBridge participants acquire higher level teaching and perception skills, and they also benefit from new knowledge on how professional work, particularly in engineering, contributes economic and social value. They also expand their professional skills in areas outside their earlier experience, boosting their employability.

Collaborating companies will benefit in several ways. First, those that employ participants will benefit from the new research-based knowledge that participants gain from exposure to LifeBridge. Part of the research knowledge came from analysing major project failures, and there is, as yet, little awareness of this research in Australian firms.

Collaborating firms can evaluate participants first-hand as potential hires.

Firms that provide projects for internships also have access to insights gained for seeing their projects performed by a group of outsiders, possibly revealing novel insights and solutions.

Firms that provide sponsored internships will gain access to additional engineering and business resources that they could otherwise only obtain with much greater investment. Also they are gaining access to world-class research results only available at the moment in Perth.

Improving networking, experiencing a business environment, and employment outcomes for CALD participants will also help build community cohesion and inclusion, particularly among groups with inferior employment outcomes.

## Financial Support

LifeBridge Institute has attracted in-kind support from several local businesses in the resources sector, including:

- a) 200 sq metres of city office space for a co-working environment for first 15 months - \$200,000 value. Participants will contribute towards outgoings and staff salaries with modest usage fees.
- b) Voluntary coaching and mentoring from experienced professionals valued at \$240,000

LifeBridge Institute is also applying for grants to help expand the scope of operations.