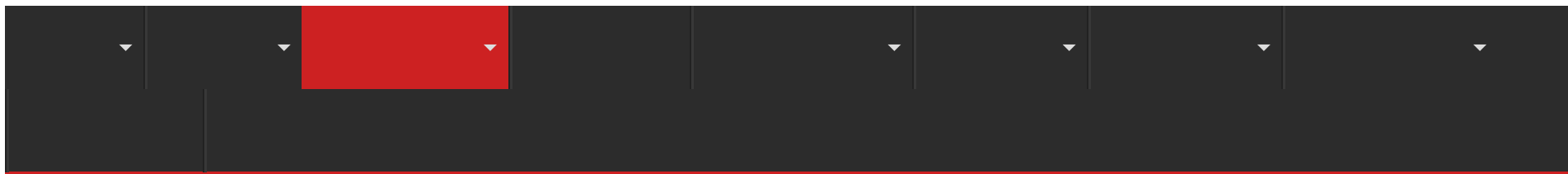




# National marketing reach



# CAMPUS REVIEW



[Home](#) | [Features](#) | [From high school dropout to High Court appellant to higher ed leader](#)

---

Welcome **Alan Manly!**

- Change Password
- Logout

---

Ref. B/189/09 | Chair Professor/Professor/Associate Professor





Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong › City University of Hong Kong › [Full Time](#)

Ref: AsstProf/APS/0518 | Assistant Professor  
New Territories, Hong Kong › The Education University of Hong Kong › [Full Time](#)

Reference number: A161-18CA | Lecturer/Senior Lecturer  
Wellington › Massey University › [Full Time](#)

Global Search for Chair Professor / Professor / Associate Professor / Assistant Professor  
Kowloon, Hong Kong › The Hong Kong Polytechnic University › [Full Time](#)

By: Loren Smith in Features, Industry & Research, Top Stories June 22, 2018 0

A small farm on the outskirts of Bacchus Marsh, about halfway between Melbourne and Ballarat, is the birthplace of a self-described 'unlikely entrepreneur'. But it took decades for Alan Manly to get to that point.

The managing director of Sydney-based private tertiary college Group Colleges Australia (GCA) grew up in poverty.

After dropping out of school in Year 9 (which he says was the 'done thing') he found solid employment unexpectedly quickly. "[My mum] thought all her Christmases had come at once when I got a job as a postman," he said.

Despite the fact that, after being given uniforms, he'd "never seen so much clothing", mail delivery life wasn't for him. So, to his mother's disappointment, he embarked on vocational study. "She thought it was pretty much frivolous, giving up a good government job to be an apprentice in electronics."



By the time he graduated, it was the mid '70s, and the computer boom had begun. He chanced upon a job automating gambling tickets. From there, he moved to a role at a startup software company. That's when things went legally sour.

With a plot reminiscent of cult Australian comedy film [The Castle](#), a [dispute](#) over a fraudulent \$115 invoice led to 10 years of legal battles, including 250 court appearances. Almost bankrupt, Manly ended up representing himself at Australia's highest court, and won.

Concurrently, he did – and didn't do – many things. There were four years of unemployment. But he also worked for an American computer company which had been "desperate" for employees. "You had the company car ... and you traveled business class," he said.

That's why, after being inspired by a 'self-awareness' talk at his company, he called his decision to become an entrepreneur around three years later "heroic".

Like many first ventures, his didn't work out. Fortunately, though, a computer programming school was looking for a new director. He explained what happened next: "They asked a couple of underemployed entrepreneurs to take it over, and I was one of them.

"From there, vocational education became regulated, and then a thing called Tiananmen Square occurred. Lots of Chinese students.

"We saw an opportunity, 'cause Chinese students liked to learn to program."

Thus began his role recruiting Chinese students, as founding and managing director of then vocational-only, IT programming school Group Colleges Australia. In this respect, he felt he had an advantage: his Chinese godson helped him understand Chinese cultural mores.

"He used silence as a statement.

"He would say, 'use the silence'.

"And off I went to Asia and I learned that that was the core of their negotiation style."

All was going smoothly. But then, his wife whispered in his ear.

"She thought we should be a higher education provider. And she thought that the real opportunity wasn't in IT particularly, it was in accounting...

"I told her she was wasting her time ... She totally ignored me, that's why we're successful."



60% OF AUSTRALIA'S  
TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS  
TRUST ONE ENTERPRISE  
SAAS PROVIDER

technologyone [FIND OUT MORE](#)



MOVE THROUGH  
LIFE WITH  
CONFIDENCE

UniSuper



Today, GCA runs three businesses: Central College, offering VET qualifications in business, accounting and tourism; Universal Business School Sydney, offering 'entrepreneurial' MBAs and business degrees; and Metro English College, an ESL education provider.

By 'successful' Manly means this: "If you look at learner engagement, which is one of the measures in QILT, [and] if you then look at postgraduate results in Australia, we were best.

"Now, if you were going to say that's possibly an aberration, you're not gonna get much fight for me, but it means we're up there, doesn't it?"

He credits this to that fact that he treats students as customers. Indeed, they are. For instance, a one-year Certificate IV in Accounting at Central College costs \$5,560, exclusive of additional fees.

His greatest competitors, he says, are not sandstone universities. Rather, its satellite campuses of small universities that vie for the same kinds of students. But he isn't bothered by it, as he thinks potential students are put off by their marketing tactics.

"So, they get their brochure and it's got a mock Tudor building of some sort, or the university, and then they find that they're going to the Sydney campus of, for instance, a university in the middle of Queensland."

Essentially all of GCA's 1,500 students are international. They mostly come from India, Pakistan and Vietnam.

"It's not hard to get up in front of a bunch of parents in either China or India and say, 'Would you like to be an entrepreneur?' They don't find it offensive at all," he said.

"You're talking about entrepreneurs, you're talking about opportunity, you're talking about the next generation in your family. So, that is a powerful sales pitch."

Manly says, contrary to perceptions that international students are isolated, the ones at GCA largely enjoy studying in Australia. The reasons for this are twofold: study recruitment agents have a vested interest in ensuring they're happy, and, like most cultural groups, they socialise and find comfort in each other's company.

The only real wobble GCA has experienced, apart from growing pains, was when the series of scandals in vocational education occurred in 2016, where several shonky providers were outed by the media.

"All of Australia suffered...," Manly explained. "...Talking to Austrade people, even [in terms of the] credibility of the brand 'Australia'."



eMag archive



Strictly speaking | Eveninger

🕒 May 22, 2018

Strictly Speaking | Snowflake

🕒 March 12, 2018



While the VET sector is still in recovery mode, other higher education providers, too, are now facing reputational challenges as, among other things, youth unemployment remains high. Manly is unfazed by this.

"If you can find a period of time that industry was happy with the product that the universities produced, I would look forward to hearing about it", he said.

"I don't think the education systems have ever really failed. They've produced educated individuals."

Regardless, GCA doesn't track its students, post-graduation, so he doesn't know whether it produces employable graduates. Anecdotally, he claims many GCA graduates return to their home countries to work in family businesses.

So, what's next for GCA? Sadly, not a degree in zoology, Manly informed.

"The most popular course on earth, in higher ed, is the MBA ... The only thing that I think our company has credibility in the market is for [teaching would-be] entrepreneurs."

Though he is considering creating CGA branches in other states, ultimately, he's unsure about what direction he will take the college in next.

With signature candour, he noted that he doesn't "believe entrepreneurs really know what they're doing. I think they just get inspired."

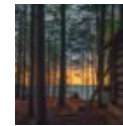
### Do you have an idea for a story?

Email [dallas.bastian@apned.com.au](mailto:dallas.bastian@apned.com.au)



### Binge-watching

🕒 September 15, 2017



### Oblivion? No just off-grid

🕒 July 12, 2017



### When rain lashes concrete on a hot day, Petrichor is the divine essence of stone

🕒 June 15, 2017



## Get the news delivered straight to your inbox

Receive the top stories in our weekly newsletter [SIGN UP NOW](#)

👁 Post Views: 26

Share this:



Tagged with:

ALAN MANLY

ENTREPRENEURSHIP

GROUP COLLEGES AUSTRALIA

---

Logged in as Alan Manly. [Log out?](#)

**Post Comment**

---

[Contact Us](#)

[Advertise with us](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[Editorial guidelines](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Terms of use](#)

Email Address\*

First Name\*

Last Name\*

Company Name

Please select which forms of communication you would like



E-newsletters



Partner messages



to receive from us

Submit

---

© Copyright 2018 APN Educational Media All Rights Reserved. Registration on or use of this site constitutes acceptance of our [Terms and Conditions](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

