

UCCI in mentoring initiative

By Tad Stoner

Predicting a head start for graduates seeking professional employment, University College of the Cayman Islands administrators this week launched a classroom-mentoring programme with top accountants from the "Big 4" firms.

Created in conjunction with the Cayman Islands Society of Professional Accountants (CISPA), the programme will focus initially on nearly 30 students in the managerial accounting course led by senior lecturer Clive Stewart, who will open his class for 30 minutes twice each month to senior professionals from local accounting firms, addressing small groups of students about both classroom and "real world" problems and questions.

"We want to build on the [classroom] concepts as much as possible, so students can see how things work and how decisions are made in the real world," Stewart said, speaking to the inaugural gathering of mentors from PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC), Deloitte, KPMG and Ernst and Young.

The programme had its genesis in the college's 80-member Partnership in Education programme, in which students are temporarily placed as interns in a range of local firms, receiving professional experience and training.

Mary Anne Cannon, UCCI director of student services, said the mentoring concept had been created in talks with PwC partner and chairman of the CISPA Membership Committee Charles Bolland.

"We were talking about the [education] programme and we started talking about mentoring, about their mission and our mission, and we came up with this. It's a more broad-brush approach than the Partnership in Education, which reaches only a few students each time. This reaches more students because the mentor comes into the classroom and talks about what they [and the students] have going on."

Bolland said the mentoring effort was very much a pilot programme that he hoped to expand, but that initially he sought to limit participation in order to manage its development. The seven mentors, he said, were carefully selected for a balance of age and experience.

"We didn't want to approach all 950 CISPA members so we explained the context, and looked at people who perhaps mentor in their own firms, people who are not that far removed from the days of being students themselves, trying to get a balance between being a professional and a student," Bolland said.

The seven - Rennie Khan from Ernst and Young; Craig Smith and Lisa Hylton from PwC; Jenny Frizzelle and David Watt from KPMG; and Laurie Mernett and Ben Fielding from Deloitte - are all aged between 23 and their late 30s, Bolland said.

The programme will start at 9:30am on 21 February when all seven will converge on Stewart's second-floor classroom in the Sybil McLaughlin Building, and divide up the 29 students. Subsequent visits are scheduled for 28 February, 6 and 10 March, and 3 and 10 April. The final session will evaluate progress.

Both Bolland and the mentoring team worried, however, that 30 minutes, twice per month, was insufficient to create a lasting impact.

"We wanted to test the waters before rolling out a larger programme," the PwC partner said, explaining that scheduling difficulties had restricted available times, and that, while minimal, the 30-minute exposure marked a start.

"UCCI has a limited number of hours, but we are starting small to demonstrate [the value] to UCCI and to the students, and maybe later we can take it out of the classroom, maybe beyond the school, and turn it into something bigger," he said.

Both he and Cannon agreed that the programme would give participating students an advantage when they ultimately sought professional employment.

"This will definitely give them a 'leg up', and I would think," Boland said, "given the role model and someone to talk to about the real world, that hopefully, there will be a connection between the mentor and the students, something that will last."

"The students," Cannon said, "are all in the associate degree programme and they are all viable candidates for the companies to consider hiring. They are after all, talking to the 'Big 4'."

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