

# TOP PROFESSIONAL VOICES IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT



# SUSAN SCHLINKER

## Senior Talent and Employability Officer Study Queensland

Nicknamed “The Postman” because she delivers, Susan brings seven years of experience in international education across learning abroad, recruitment, Higher Degree Research (HDR), industry engagement, and employability. At Study Queensland, she developed and leads Talent-Ed, the state’s flagship employability program for international students. Previously at QUT, she expanded global mobility and HDR industry engagement. Susan is Deputy Convenor of IEAA’s Student Life Network and was recently shortlisted for the 2025 Emerging Leader Award by Australian Professionals of Multicultural Communities.



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## How did your personal and professional journey lead you to your current role in student engagement?

My journey into student engagement has had more twists than a rollercoaster! I studied history and art history at UQ, dreaming of curating exhibitions in Paris. Despite strong academic results, I lacked industry connections and experience. So, I pivoted into arts organisations, then into finance—where I streamlined a loan assessment system so efficiently that I was made redundant just one month after buying my first home!

During a difficult personal time, while studying a short course at the University of Tasmania, I accessed critical student support services that genuinely changed my life. That experience sparked a promise from me: I'd find a way to give back and support students. After leaving finance, I joined QUT, which led to seven fulfilling years—first in the Creative Industries International team, then coordinating Higher Degree Research Industry Engagement.

Now, I'm thrilled to be in my current role, where I champion the value of employability skills, networks, and experience—lessons I've learned firsthand. I've spent nearly a decade curating student experiences, and it's been the most rewarding way to use my curatorial skills.



*One stand-up gig made public speaking easy. Now I MC Talent-Ed's Engagement pillar, connecting employers and international talent through networking that delivers real outcomes.*

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## What are the key responsibilities and goals in your role for boosting student engagement and retention at your university?

My role was created in February 2024 to design and lead a statewide employability program for international students—an opportunity I couldn't refuse!

From the outset, I set out to engage both students and employers. A 2022 AAGE report found 70% of employers hesitant to hire international talent, which inspired me to build Talent-Ed—a program that develops student skills while shifting employer perceptions.

It's been incredibly rewarding to create something that empowers students and drives change in how international talent is valued. The results speak for themselves:

- **90% of students reported an increase in career readiness**
- **99% improved their communication skills**
- **95% improved their teamwork skills**
- **90% strengthened their problem-solving skills**
- **Student confidence engaging with employers rose from 6.8 before the challenges to 8.5 after**
- **Employer confidence in hiring international talent grew from 5.89 to 7.16**
- **Employers reported being more likely to engage international students through work-integrated learning after seeing their talent at Innovation Challenges**

## In your opinion, what are the essential skills or qualities for someone to excel in the field?

To excel in student engagement, I believe five key qualities make all the difference:

- 1. Growth mindset** – I treat every new initiative as a pilot, focusing on what I can learn from both its successes and failures.
- 2. Empathy** – Students often share deeply personal stories, and it's a privilege to hear them. The best outcomes come when students feel seen, heard, and validated before receiving tailored support.
- 3. Networking** – My job wouldn't be possible without strong collaborative relationships. Whether it's collaborating with education providers, industry partners, or fellow government agencies, I'm passionate about building sustainable, productive, and positive relationships—where we kick goals together and have fun along the way!
- 4. Creativity** – Students are constantly bombarded with information. Don't be afraid to try something unconventional—sometimes the oddball ideas are the ones that cut through and spark real engagement.
- 5. Presentation Skills** – Know your audience, be clear and concise, and make it memorable. I once took a stand-up comedy course, and it transformed how I present. If you want your message to stick, you have to stand out.

These skills have shaped how I connect with students and colleagues—and they've made the work not just rewarding, but genuinely fun.

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*In 2018, as International Engagement Officer at QUT Creative Industries, I sent my first students abroad to Michigan State University for the Lights, Camera, Action program—a milestone for us all.*



*Strong academic–industry connections are vital. In 2022, we celebrated HDR Engagement champions at the QUT Business Leaders Forum.*

## Is there a student success story that stands out to you as a highlight of your work?

Some students truly distinguish themselves by embracing every opportunity—and Chintan Advani was one of those standouts. During my time coordinating the HDR Industry Engagement program at QUT, Chintan actively participated in two HDR internships and competed in both the Three Minute Thesis and Visualise Your Thesis competitions.

I had the privilege of facilitating his internships and coaching him as a finalist in the Three Minute Thesis, where his clarity and confidence shone—earning second place. Later, as he transitioned into academic work at QUT, Chintan generously gave back by mentoring new HDR interns. His commitment to professional development and community engagement paid off: he soon secured his dream engineering role with Ipswich City Council.

Watching Chintan leverage these experiences to shape his career was incredibly rewarding. His journey is a powerful testament to the value of proactive participation—engaging deeply, building networks, and confidently drawing on experiences in job interviews.

[\(You can watch Chintan's story here.\)](#)



*Collaboration is key. In 2024, partnering with Engineers Australia and Migration Queensland, we delivered Talent-Ed's first industry-specific event to raise employer awareness and empower students resulting in our first event with real employment outcomes.*



### A Note from the Founder

Working with Susan (Suz) on the Study Queensland Innovation Challenges has been nothing short of inspiring. Over the past four challenges, she has been the driving force behind bringing this state-wide employability initiative to life - connecting employers and students from universities, TAFEs, and schools across Queensland. We love working with you Suz!

## Could you tell us about a specific project or initiative you led that significantly boosted student engagement?

When I stepped into coordinating QUT's Higher Degree Research (HDR) Industry Engagement program, the federal government had just revised RTP funding to incentivise industry partnerships. One month in, I proposed a bold strategy: actively increase international student participation.

I knew international HDR candidates were eager for real-world experience, so I pushed for explicit inclusion and urged employers to consider both domestic and international interns.

**Within 18 months, the program grew 70%, with international students making up nearly 70% of HDR internships.** This not only boosted engagement but also enriched workplaces with global talent. One standout: QAGOMA created Australia's first AI Arts Technician role, hiring their HDR intern to continue groundbreaking work.

This initiative proved that inclusion drives innovation, opens doors, and delivers life-changing outcomes for students and industry alike.



*Study Queensland Innovation Challenges, delivered by Campus Consultancy, are high-impact one-day events driving growth for students, employers, and education providers. The Toowoomba Challenge in April 2025 was a standout—the smiles on the day said it all.*

## **What motivates you to continue working in student engagement?**

What motivates me is a mix of purpose, personal experience, and the inspiration I draw from the courage and resilience of international students. The path they choose isn't easy, and employability support can be genuinely life-changing for those who embrace it.

I'm also energised by the sector itself—full of values-driven people who champion respect, inclusivity, and equal opportunity.

My own journey fuels my passion too. I graduated with limited networks and experience, which made finding work in a niche field tough. I pivoted careers but never let go of my goal: to create meaningful, memorable experiences that open minds. In student engagement, I get to do exactly that.

Now, I share the lessons I learned the hard way—about networks, experience, and mindset—with thousands of international students. And nothing compares to the moment when a student says, "I tried what you suggested—and it worked!"

Every story, every breakthrough, every moment of growth is a privilege to witness—and that's what keeps me going.

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## **What advice would you give to someone new in this field?**

Numbers will always be a key KPI in student engagement, but don't be discouraged by the 40–60% drop-off from registration to participation. Even the best programs face this—so don't take it personally. Instead, measure impact in other ways, like student feedback, confidence gains, or the quality of connections made.

In my experience, students are more likely to listen to their faculty than a central unit, so partner with faculties to get your message out. They're also strongly influenced by peers, so wherever possible, empower students to promote opportunities to each other.

And finally—network, network, network. Join or build a community of practice. Having a trusted circle to share challenges and ideas with is invaluable in this field.