

NEWS

3m Number of downloads of Discover, a music recommendation app from Perth-based Filter Squad.

Perth sets pace with start-ups



SPACE CUBED: Dash Dhakshinamoorthy (left) and Claire Robertson (middle) with the first graduates from Perth's Founder Institute. Photo: Bohdan Warchomj

Two recent technology events point to the continued rise of Perth's start-up sector.



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PERTH 'hackers' have justified the city's growing reputation as a host for start-ups, walking away with a swag of prizes at a national competition aimed at mining government data for the people.

It comes as the city's first batch of students graduated from the Founder Institute and launched their start-up companies.

About 700 'hackers' (an affectionate use of the term) from around Australia last week undertook a combined 10,000 hours of development in a 48-hour competition to convert copious amounts of government data into something more digestible.

The result was 130 apps, 'mash ups' and 'data visualisation' projects, all vying for \$170,000 in prize money at GovHack 2013.

Perth teams, which represented only 11 of the 113 competing teams, took out a third of the prizes.

This was an impressive result considering it was the first time Western Australia had been a part of the competition, intended to draw together people from government, industry, academia and the public to "mash up, re-use and remix government data".

"It's marvellous that WA has such a vibrant start-up community," Jim Wyatt, general

manager of the Department of Commerce's digital economy branch, said.

"It's also a great opportunity for government to look at these ideas and consider releasing this public data to inspire developers."

The department was a sponsor and also a judge at the competition.

The range of projects created in such a short time points to rich data sources in government departments and what can be done given a bit of creativity and time pressure.

One award-winning app, Pixtory, uses the State Library of WA's photo archive of 70,000 images to give users a "virtual historical walk-through" as they wander the streets of Perth.

Other winning projects highlighted the rich vein of data on suburbs through maps, focused on 200 years of Australian print advertising and displayed the weather, animals and adventurers of Antarctica.

It is hoped some of these projects will soon be commercialised. The success of the Lost Perth Facebook page (56,000 likes in three weeks) points to Pixtory's potential.

On the same day these winners were announced, Perth's Founder Institute graduated its first eight entrepreneurs.

The institute, which is part of a global network, helps fast track and launch start-ups in Perth.

The graduates were put through a tough four-month program, after signing up with 13 other aspirants in February.

The 40 per cent graduation rate is on a par with the global rate. Apart from attending weekly evening classes, applicants also undertook private mentoring sessions and were given 'stretch' tasks to validate their venture ideas.

They were handed dreaded 'special assignments' if their work is not up to scratch. Plus, many held down a day job.

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- Dash Dhakshinamoorthy

"Perth as a start-up ecosystem is definitely gathering momentum," co-director of the institute, Dash Dhakshinamoorthy, said.

"This is evident from the sheer number of start-up events that are taking place almost daily around the city."

The graduation was held at Spacecubed, the co-working space at 45 St Georges Terrace, which is celebrating its first birthday this month.

The entrepreneurs presented their ideas to a panel of judges, invited guests, sponsors and mentors.

Long-term academic Ashley Aitken, wants to change how universities work, by providing an alternative approach through his company Acavista that enables students to choose how and when they learn and how much they spend.

"It's an industry that has stayed virtually unchanged for a thousand years," Dr Aitken said.

Fellow graduate Ania Niedzwiedek, who has 15 years experience in community theatre, has designed FundiFest – a web-based funding platform for artists and the performing arts.

Chris Baudia, from Montpellier, France, launched a service called GeoMoby.

"With half of retailing going online, we have patentable battery-saving technology that underpins our 'white label' plug-in for retailers to send alerts to customers as they are walking near the shop in question," Mr Baudia said.

Other ideas included Estelle Oliveri's Eternal Eve, a social network for women, Jon Haywood's Codedam, which enables games junkies to code their own games, and Matthew Hender's CycleMyCity, an app that puts cyclists in touch with stores and other riders.

Many of the founders have turned their passion into a business idea.

Nowhere was this more evident than in Thrillseeker. Serial adrenalin junkies and best mates Anton Oud and Hassan Wardani want to put like-minded people in touch with adventure sports operators. They aim to start with the kite-surfing community in WA.

The institute's co-director, Claire Robertson, said: "It's extraordinary to see just how far the founders progressed their companies in 15 weeks, but this is just the beginning for the founders."

"I cannot wait to see what they can achieve in 12 months."

The GovHack weekend and the Founder Institute course, together with initiatives such as StartUp Weekend, Silicon Beach, eGroup and various MeetUps, point to a growing support structure underpinning the tech and start-up scene in WA.

This did not exist a few years ago. There are now people with experience in early-stage ventures willing to help fledgling businesses.

"We urge the ecosystem to come together to help these companies succeed," Mr Dhakshinamoorthy said.

"Success breeds further success. I am confident with this in motion, Perth will only move up the value chain and develop an entrepreneurial economy."

For more on GovHack's 2013 projects: <http://hackerspace.govhack.org/>

For more on Perth Founder Institute: www.fi.co

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