

Working with Business & Industry

BIG bananas make a dream come true

Ramy Azer's dream of mass-producing ancient Egyptian paper has taken a great leap forward, thanks to hard work, some help from Australia's banana industry, and his involvement in the University of Adelaide's BIG scheme.

BIG (Business Initiatives from Graduates) is aimed at fostering tertiary students and graduates who have innovative business ideas.

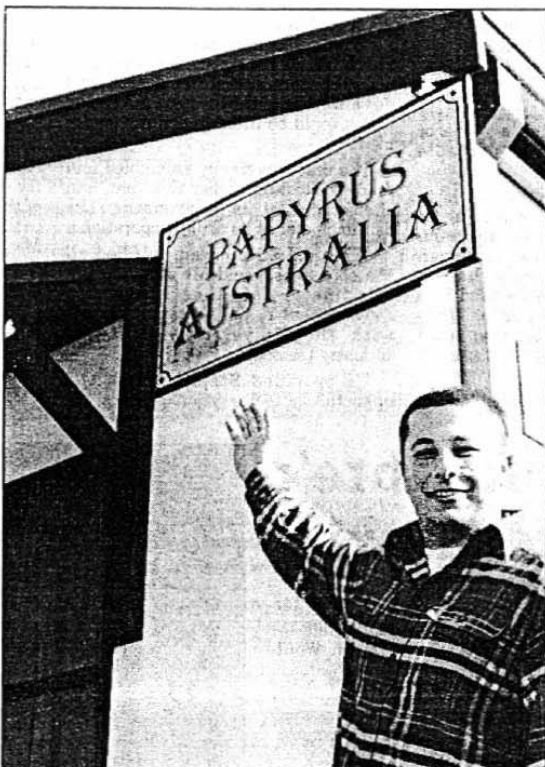
Those accepted into the scheme are provided with twelve months of some financial support, training, assistance, rent-free office space and mentor support to help establish their new business.

Successful applicants also undertake a two-year Graduate Diploma in Business Enterprise, giving them the knowledge to set up and run their own small businesses.

Mr Azer, who completed his Mechanical Engineering degree at the University of South Australia in 1995, decided against taking a job with a major oil company and instead turned to his dream of mass-producing papyrus—environmentally friendly paper based on the papyrus of ancient Egypt.

"Papyrus is merely 'paper' in Latin, so any piece of paper is papyrus. But these days papyrus is used to describe the old Egyptian paper, which is made from sliced reeds or other plant material," Mr Azer said.

Egyptian born, Mr Azer once sold papyrus in Europe as an environmental substitute to wood pulp or forest paper. But he soon realised that the demand for papyrus, which is hand made, was far



Ramy Azer: BIG scheme kickstarts papyrus dream.
Photo: David Ellis.

greater than the supply.

His plan was to find a way of mass-producing papyrus, so that those with an environmental conscience could use it as a viable alternative to other forms of paper.

Under the BIG program he has started his business and now operates his own independent company, Papyrus Australia Pty Ltd, which is still located at the University's

Thebarton Campus.

"The BIG program gave me the chance to spend a year starting my business and investigate where I was going with it, what I could do with it. In the meantime you don't have to worry about getting a job. You're also studying, but the study you do adds to your business knowledge," he said.

The first 12 months were spent establishing the compa-

ny on a shoestring budget.

But this year Papyrus Australia received a major boost in the form of a development grant from AusIndustry worth about \$500,000.

"My goals now are much bigger than they were when I first started," Mr Azer said.

"I started off with a \$3000 budget, and I planned to build a small factory that I would operate, pumping out a few papers to sell around Adelaide from the back of a car.

"Now we have a budget of half a million dollars, and we're introducing an industry, a whole new technology, a concept. Now we have the time and money to build the machines we need."

Instead of turning to Nile reeds as his source for the papyrus, Mr Azer sought an alternative plant which was readily available in Australia and could be used to make quality paper.

What he discovered was far greater than he could have hoped for.

"We found that one of the best materials to use was banana—the banana plant itself, not the fruit. It shoots about seven feet in a year, you have this big tree that produces around 60 kilograms of fruit and produces only once in its lifetime, and then you have to chop it down.

"Banana producers end up with at least 200 kilograms of waste for the 60 kilograms of banana that they have each year. And they pay lots of money to get rid of the waste.

"So we discovered this raw material that has more flesh and produces better paper

than the Egyptian papyrus, and it's available and costs nothing."

Ramy Azer has established close relations with the North Queensland Banana Growers Corporation in Tully, who will supply the raw material initially at no cost to Papyrus Australia.

"Because they're happy for us to take the banana waste off their hands, they're giving us free land, free sheds, and free raw material.

"Our first factory will be based there," Mr Azer said. "It really couldn't have worked out any better."

Mr Azer said that a fully functioning manufacturing plant was still about two years away.

In the meantime, testing would continue in a bid to develop the best quality papyrus possible, using the most environmentally friendly methods possible.

"The normal process of making paper usually involves a lot of water and chemicals," he said.

"But our main objective is to eliminate any chemical process, and at the same time we're looking at reducing the energy consumption of our factory.

"We already know that the paper we can produce is stronger and better quality than pulp or recycled paper.

"And we believe there are people in the community, people with a high environmental consciousness, who will see papyrus as a viable alternative to other forms of paper."

—David Ellis