

# How Angella went from healthcare to coder in nine months

**Euan Black** *Work and careers reporter*



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Angella Lao traded a stable and well-paid job as a cardiac sonographer for the chance to build a career in technology when her days started to blur into one.

By that point, she had worked in the role for five years and felt like she was no longer learning anything new. Her opportunities for career advancement also appeared limited.

“If I had stayed there, I think I would have become very bored,” Ms Lao said.

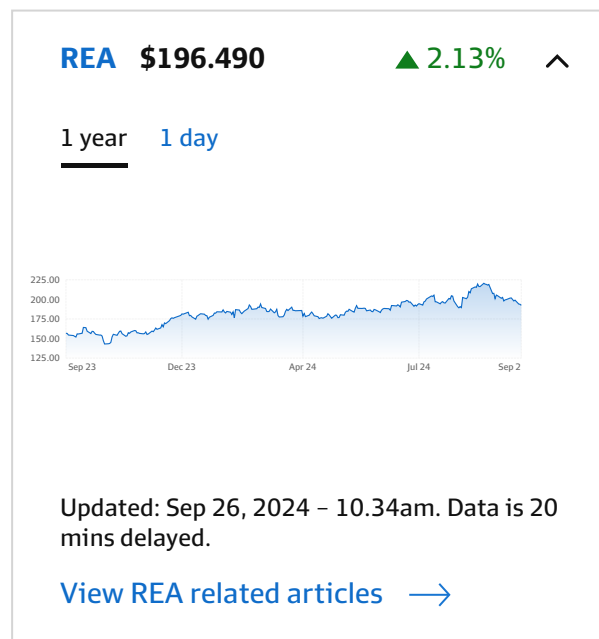


Angella Lao switched from a career as a cardiac nurse to one in technology. **Eamon Gallagher**

So she pursued a career in tech, as she wanted a job that would challenge her every day and force her to keep learning. She ended up applying for a nine-month, full-time software engineering course at computer science institute Holberton School Australia.

The course has no lectures and is instead based on a hands-on, project-based curriculum that aims to mimic how things get done in the workplace.

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Under the supervision of an experienced software engineer, who acts like a mentor rather than a formal teacher, students learn the foundations of software engineering and computer science by completing weekly programming projects.

The course, which is not officially accredited, is an example of the practical training programs that employers are increasingly using to fill vacancies in the face of persistent skills shortages and declining numbers of Australians studying technology-related university degrees [<https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/school-leavers-shun-uni-enrolments-hit-near-decade-low-20240101-p5euhl>].

Employers have also used these programs to help narrow their gender pay gaps and hire people from other underrepresented groups in tech [<https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/careers/meet-the-teenager-with-no-degree-who-landed-a-job-at-macquarie-20221014-p5bpu9>].

Similar challenges recently encouraged Chartered Accountants Australia and New Zealand to create a new pathway for school-leavers without a university degree to become chartered accountants [<https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/workplace/shake-up-means-you-can-become-a-chartered-accountant-without-a-degree-20240829-p5k6f3>].

More than 50 people, including Ms Lao, have successfully landed a tech job upon completing the course since Holberton School Australia was set up in 2022. The local institute accepts three cohorts a year and is part of a global network of software engineering schools founded in Silicon Valley that has a presence in more than 30 countries.

So far, nine out of 10 Australian graduates have secured employment at companies such as REA Group, Amazon Web Services, Reece, RACV and SportsBet, on an average starting salary of \$80,000.

Students can only access the course if they pass a rigorous, three-stage assessment that involves building a website from scratch in two weeks.

Jed Roberts, co-founder and head of operations at Holberton School Australia, said the school had proven that people could land a job in tech more quickly and cheaply than via the traditional university pathway.

The nine-month course has a standard price tag of \$14,850, but cheaper places are available through employer-sponsored scholarships.

“We’re providing a more accessible, practical path into tech, because at the moment to get into tech you have to go through three or four years at university, which costs [about] 30 or 40 grand,” Mr Roberts said.

He told the *The Australian Financial Review* that some students had not gone to university and came from a range of backgrounds including hospitality, nursing, accounting and sales.

The Technology Council of Australia said alternative pathways into the industry like Holberton’s course were needed to meet the council and government’s joint goal of having 1.2 million tech jobs in Australia by 2030.

“Part of this challenge lies in getting Australia’s smart talent into entry-level tech jobs through alternative pathways, such as vocational/VET training, vendor courses or earn-while-you-learn models where companies provide training with paid employment,” the council spokeswoman said.

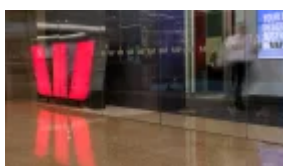
“Alternative pathways also help create a more inclusive and diverse tech industry by opening doors to individuals from different backgrounds, experiences and education levels, ensuring the workforce better reflects the broader community.”

As for Ms Lao, property exchange platform PEXA hired her as a graduate software engineer after she finished her course.

Her starting salary was about half what she earned as an experienced cardiac sonographer. But she reckons she has a good chance of surpassing her top healthcare salary over time as she believes her earnings ceiling in tech is much higher.

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