Touching down after an early flight and another hectic start to the week, Rob McKay, CEO of Australian Retail Franchise Group (the parent company of Wendy’s) makes his way to a coffee shop in the heart of Adelaide—a pleasant change from the usual boardroom meeting spot.

Awaiting him is 25-year-old marketing dynamo-in-the-making and aspiring brand manager, Brian Sheedy. The pair has been handpicked and expertly matched as part of the intensive and highly sought after UniSA Business Career Mentoring Program.

McKay is one of over 140 of the best and brightest business leaders, entrepreneurs and CEOs from around the state and beyond, mentoring second and third-year UniSA students, like Brian, over the next six months. He explains why he is taking time out from his busy schedule to contribute to the Program.

“For me, mentoring creates a vital link between the needs of industry and the graduates being produced. We help students expand their professional networks, develop job hunting techniques and assist with workforce transitioning strategies.”

As the pair sit down to what will become a regular monthly breakfast meeting, they are surprised to discover they share several common threads. Both are patriotic South Australians who love cricket, have worked overseas, have high career aspirations and thoroughly enjoy the ups, downs and challenges of working in business and marketing fields. Both have also studied at the UniSA Business School.

According to McKay, who has recently returned to his hometown of Adelaide to raise his family after spending 17 years overseas and interstate, managing a company of over 200 staff and maintaining a busy schedule has its challenges—but it’s also what he thrives on.

“Organisation and time management are key to getting the most out of a mentoring partnership. While I’m often on the go, the rewards of being a mentor are well worth the investment.”

McKay believes that, for business leaders, mentoring often provides opportunities to improve leadership skills, share business knowledge and gain a sense of achievement. At the same time, it can also lead to early access to the UniSA graduate pool.

“I was lucky enough to have had some wonderful mentors during my earlier career, which I found highly beneficial to my development. Now, I have a great desire to ‘give back’ and share advice and experiences which I hope will help my mentee fast-track his career.”

Since McKay graduated nearly 25 years ago, he admits a lot has changed—the curriculum, the type of learning and the graduates being produced. He says that the UniSA Business School’s Mentoring Program is a great way to stay in touch with the University and keep abreast of current initiatives.

For high-achieving Bachelor of Management (Marketing) student Sheedy, who was awarded the 2009 Young Business Leader of the Year and selected for the highly competitive Unilever graduate employment program, gaining a better understanding of multinational companies and developing a career path beyond his graduate placement are his goals of being a mentee.

“I knew I had some gaps in my learning, especially in a global environment. There’s only so much you can learn in the classroom, especially in the areas of professional etiquette and workplace transitioning.”

He says that the greatest surprise so far is that mentors sometimes have similar professional issues to battle with; it’s just that they’re on a different scale. “It’s the way CEOs conduct themselves that provides such a great learning opportunity.”

Sheedy has also developed a deep admiration for business leaders who give their time so generously. “No matter how busy anyone thinks they are, a CEO is always busier! I make sure our time is productive and take every opportunity to learn from someone who is so time-poor and information-rich.”

And the best part about the Program? “It’s so inspiring to have regular contact with a CEO the calibre of Rob who has worked all over the world.”

Already, the 2012 Career Mentoring Program is delivering results—in the first six weeks of operation, 11 students were offered internships, practicums or work placements through their mentors—a fantastic sign of positive things to come.

For more information visit: unisa.edu.au/business/Division/Alumni/Leadership/Mentoring

Mentoring: What’s in it for you?

1. Leadership and professional development opportunities
2. A tick for your corporate social responsibility goals
3. First access to the graduate pool
4. Collaborative partnerships with UniSA
5. A better understanding of tomorrow’s future leaders
6. Personal fulfilment. It’s a unique way of ‘giving back’