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## Work integrated learning in international marketing: Student insights

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## ABSTRACT

This study explores students' perspectives of live business projects, a form of experiential and work integrated learning, as an assessment component in an International Marketing course. Twenty-two focus groups were held with students participating in an international business plan competition organised at an Australian university. Using thematic analysis, we focus on three dominant themes typical of the focus group data: how live business projects prepared students for the future, how such projects motivated students to engage with and take pride in their work, and how the students linked the projects to the wider world outside of the university context. Live business projects might improve employability of graduates and engagement with course content, but students also indicated that the increased workload may be a source of stress. Educators should feel confident in the benefits of live business projects, but may also need consider how to ensure appropriate levels of work and responsibility on students and maintain the art of relationship management with industry partners.

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Universities have received much criticism for under-preparing students for the workforce, for being disconnected from reality, and for failing to catch up with industry trends and provide students with an applied understanding of the business world (Daymon and Durkin, 2013; Reed, 2015; Selingo, 2016). Traditional approaches to education can no longer equip students with the necessary skills so that they can be successful in the modern workplace environment. Scholarly enquiries and business reports have pointed out the prevalent gaps in the employability skills of business graduates (e.g., Abbasi et al., 2018; Jackson, 2016; Jackson and Chapman, 2012; Karzunina et al., 2018), such as creative problem solving, communication, teamwork, critical thinking, leadership and adaptability skills. As a consequence, universities are now under significant pressure from students, academics, policy makers, and the business sector alike to provide high-quality, relevant, and impactful business education (Pucciarelli and Kaplan, 2016).

To remain relevant, universities must transform their educational and training programs by reinvigorating their curriculum designs and encouraging diversity of teaching and learning approaches (EY, 2016). To remain competitive, business schools aim to be “more innovative, responsive, integrated and engaged” (Hall et al., 2013, p. 348). An effective approach is to proactively develop and maintain industry partnerships for student learning and professional development (Bektas and Tayauova, 2014;

EY, 2018; Moore and Morton, 2017). According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2011), industry–university collaborations are instrumental in knowledge-based economies. These linkages offer a variety of mutual benefits, ranging from industry-relevant research and student training to the exchange, transfer and dissemination of commercial knowledge. Engagement with industries will also offer students the opportunity for authentic assessment, gaining valuable exposure to modern business practices, improving their learning and employability skills (Jackson, 2015; James and Casidy, 2018; Meredith and Burkle, 2008), ultimately leading to their career success (Bozionelos et al., 2016).

## Using live business projects in curriculum design

Apart from engaging industry partners via student internships or work experience placements, business educators have incorporated industry links directly into their curriculum design and assessment. The usage of live business projects (henceforth referred to as LBP), as a form of work integrated learning (WIL), has been referred to as ‘client-sponsored projects’, ‘live case studies’, ‘client-initiated projects’, ‘client-based projects’, or ‘collaborative industry-led projects’. According to Schonell and Macklin (2018), this WIL approach can offer authentic learning experiences for a large cohort of students and be less time and resource dependent than other WIL forms such as internships. Our review of the literature suggests that LBP, as an important and useful component of cur-

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riculum design and assessment, has attracted attention from business scholars since the 1980s.

Early works of Browne (1979), Humphreys (1981) and de los Santos and Jensen (1985) emphasise the potential benefits (for students, business clients and teaching academics) associated with this innovative approach. To date, the usage of live clients in business projects is particularly popular in marketing research courses. Table 1 provides a sample of empirical studies on the contexts in which LBP were adopted and describes the benefits gained by the students. The recurring theme of the studies presented in Table 1 is that LBP provide valuable experiences for students, improving a wide range of skill sets useful for their future professional careers. However, Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2009) find the same benefits for theoretical-based projects and live business projects, and in some cases, the benefits gained from the former are even higher. In another study, Thomas and Busby (2003) indicate that students undertaking marketing projects did not enjoy a significant increase in their knowledge or skills from their involvement in the LBP (compared to those undertaking food production projects). Nevertheless, few studies have examined the both benefits and challenges of LBP, particularly in relation to the potential stress that students might experience during the course of LBP.

In the current study, we aim to enrich WIL knowledge with a particular focus on LBP, extending the current body of work on other WIL approaches (e.g., see the thematic review by Schuster and Glavas (2017) on electronic WIL and recent studies by Jackson (2017a, 2017b, 2017c) on matters related to work placements). We explore the perceived benefits and some challenges of LBP from the perspective of the students, taking into account their narratives and categorising reflections after they complete the projects. In doing so, we attempt to provide a clearer picture of how LBP allow students to realise their capabilities and personal limitations as well as how this WIL approach can influence the development of their professional attributes. The findings of the study will contribute to our development of a framework on opportunities and responsibilities for students, educators, and industry partners involved in the delivery of a particular WIL program.

## Context

The International Business Plan Competition has been organised as a major assessment component for approximately 150 students undertaking the International Marketing course over a semester at the Australian National University annually since 2011. The competition has received financial and in-kind support from the local government and a local business association, who recommended six to eight small-to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) to participate in the competition as business clients every year. Building on the Relate-Create-Donate perspective of engagement theory (Kearsley and Shneiderman, 1998), the competition incorporates the key principles of the design framework for authentic learning environments (Herrington and Oliver, 2000), allowing students to compete in groups for the preparation of an international market expansion for their designated client (four or five groups per client, four or five students per team). These student teams compete against each other to prepare the best international market expansion plan for their designated client (up to 10 clients per semester). The development of a healthy competitive climate among the teams is consistent with the scholarly view that cooperation with intergroup competition fosters higher achievement and hence better learning (Johnson et al., 1981).

At the beginning of the semester, each team is randomly allocated a client and receives a one-page project brief and the recommended structure of the final report. After an informal networking evening and multiple rounds of consultations and/or face-to-face interviews with the clients, student teams undertake compre-

hensive market screening exercises in order to identify the best and newest foreign market for their live business client to expand into. Students then propose a suitable market entry strategy and a comprehensive set of international marketing mix elements for the firm so that they can best serve the recommended target market in the proposed overseas destination.

Each team is required to submit their research in progress via a weekly report for ongoing assessment by the teaching team. Students also have the opportunity to improve their works during a series of Q&A sessions or meetings with the clients before the mid-semester break, when a project review session is organised for all student groups. At the end of the semester, each team makes a professional presentation to their client and their peers via a series of conference-style sessions, in addition to submitting their final international business plan. Each client has a winner (selected by the teaching team and client representatives); all project winners then go on and compete for the prize of the best overall team supported by the local government. Feedback from the clients indicates that the participating SMEs were very pleased to be involved in the competition (see Table 2).

## Focus groups

As the focus of this study was to be on student opinions of the LBP as a form of WIL, ethic approval was obtained to conduct focus groups with students enrolled in the course. Data were drawn from a total of 22 focus groups of student teams participating in the competition. A focus group approach was chosen because it allows students to interact with one another and provides rich data through discussion, offering insights into students' dynamic attitudes towards the LBP (Morgan, 1996). The 22 focus groups were facilitated with an open-ended interview schedule which included questions about what the students felt had been useful about the project, what aspects of the project they would like improved, and a general review of the project in hindsight. Each focus group lasted between 45 minutes to one hour. These focus groups were recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Adopting a semantic approach to thematic analytic framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006), we particularly focused on students' orientations to the live projects. Through interpretation of the explicit meanings of the students' talk, we analyse the significance, broader meanings and implications of the patterns within the data. The first two authors independently read the transcripts several times, coding and organising themes from the data. Themes were then discussed and compared until an agreement was reached about the structure of each theme.

## Analysis and discussion

Through an iterative coding process of the focus group data, we identified three dominant themes. These themes are (i) 'future orientation' which involves how the live project endows students with attributes for the future, (ii) 'project orientation', which involves how students make sense of the project while undertaking the course, and (iii) 'external orientation' which relates to how students fit the project into broader world understandings.

### Future orientation

Students talked about the skills and tools the project endowed them with in relation to their careers, what they wanted to do after graduation, or how they will relate to the workplace. There were three typical ways in which the students deployed examples of this theme in their focus groups, by (i) talking about the *confidence* for the future that was instilled by the LBP, (ii) orienting to how the project *prepared* them for their future, and (iii) discussing

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