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## Work integrated learning in international marketing: Student insights

Vinh Nhat Lu<sup>a,\*</sup>, Brett Scholz<sup>b</sup>, Long T.V. Nguyen<sup>c</sup><sup>a</sup> Research School of Management, College of Business and Economics, The Australian National University, Australia<sup>b</sup> Medical School, College of Health & Medicine, The Australian National University, Australia<sup>c</sup> Professional Communication Department, School of Communication and Design, RMIT University Vietnam, Vietnam

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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-

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [vinh.lu@anu.edu.au](mailto:vinh.lu@anu.edu.au) (V.N. Lu), [brett.scholz@anu.edu.au](mailto:brett.scholz@anu.edu.au) (B. Scholz), [long.nguyenvanhang@rmit.edu.vn](mailto:long.nguyenvanhang@rmit.edu.vn) (L.T.V. Nguyen).<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ausmj.2018.05.002>

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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

**Table 1**

Examples of empirical studies on integration of live industry projects in business curriculum design.

Study	Context	Findings on student learning
Bove and Davies (2009)	One business client from within the University for a Marketing Research Course. Students compete for the best report prize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Developing consulting and research skills</li> <li>• Potential employment from the client</li> </ul>
Devasagayam and Taran (2009)	One local food retailer for the International Marketing course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deep learning</li> <li>• Improved critical thinking skills</li> </ul>
Elam and Spotts (2004)	One industrial manufacturer as client for three courses (Marketing Management, Campaign Planning and Management, Desktop Publishing). Students from each courses interacting with each other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to apply theories and concepts to practice</li> <li>• Mastering team management and project management skills</li> <li>• Practising office management and business communication skills</li> <li>• Creating/recording professional communication</li> </ul>
Pan et al. (2017)	Industry collaborations for Accounting Analytic course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enhanced problem-solving, analytical, reasoning and communication skills</li> </ul>
Parsons and Lepkowska-White (2009)	Usage versus non-usage of business clients in Marketing Foundations, Marketing Research, Advertising and Promotion International Marketing courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived equal values for theoretical and practical projects</li> <li>• In some cases, theoretical-based projects are more effective than projects that utilize real businesses</li> </ul>
Ramocki (1987)	13 business clients for 13 groups of students in Marketing Research course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stronger research abilities</li> <li>• More self-confidence</li> </ul>
Razzouk et al. (2003)	Using business clients in Marketing Strategy course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrate techniques and skills learned in other course</li> <li>• Value in interacting with clients</li> </ul>
Roth and Smith (2009)	Approx. 30 business clients for the Strategic Management courses from 2001 to 2008	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to apply course concepts</li> <li>• Insights into organisational decision making and resource integration</li> <li>• Enhanced communication, time management, interpersonal relations, decision making, problem solving, conflict resolution, and team interaction skills</li> </ul>
Scharf and Bell (2002)	12 projects for seven local small to medium sized enterprises in the European Business Studies courses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved overall skill base (including research skills, communication and presentation skills, self-learning and time management skills)</li> <li>• Enhancing future career prospects</li> </ul>
Strauss (2011)	Several clients for a capstone Marketing course. Projects were patterned after the Apprentice television show	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent learning</li> <li>• Creative problem solving</li> </ul>
Thomas and Busby (2003)	Using different industry partners for various project in different business areas (marketing, food, tourism)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of knowledge and boost in confidence</li> <li>• Enhancement in IT, communication, time management, organisation, presentation and research skills</li> <li>• Improve potential career prospects</li> <li>• Little increase in their marketing knowledge or skills for students undertaking marketing projects</li> </ul>
Vande Wiele et al. (2017)	Case study using Associate Consultant (AC) approach in a capstone undergraduate Marketing course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 60% reporting to be more effective at job interview and see the experience as a value add to their resume</li> <li>• 75% gaining a potential match with a company or job and increased confidence in making career choices</li> </ul>
Wickliff (1997)	Overall experience of using business clients in 11 Introductory Technical Communication courses from 1986 to 1991	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Value in problem definition and social negotiation skills</li> <li>• Importance of collaborative writing skills</li> </ul>

**Table 2**  
Examples of client feedback.

Feedback theme	Extracts
Student enthusiasm and quality	"I was pleased to be able to contribute my time to the program. The quality of the work presented by the students was of a high standard, and their enthusiasm was inspiring to say the least. The future is in good hands..."
Mutual benefits	"This [WIL initiative] has been enlightening, exciting and highly rewarding. The students' unique perspective on our business has been invaluable and mutually beneficial... The competition provided the students with an opportunity to make real life solutions to real life challenges whilst presenting us with unique proposals, plans and concepts to assist decision making in key areas"
Rewarding experience	"Involvement with the international business competition was very rewarding. The students did take the challenge seriously and the questions and discussions were unbiased without a preconceived approach."
New ideas	"[Company] was incredibly impressed with the opportunity to work with students in the courses. It was an unbelievable chance to market test our product range in the [overseas] marketplace and receive feedback from the people not involved in the company in anyway."
Positive outcome	"The students' final presentations were of an excellent quality and enabled us to take the time to compare market expansion strategies which will be applied in the real world... just a great experience all round".

how the project showed them how to turn knowledge into practice.

### *Efficacy beliefs*

Students suggested that the opportunity to work on a LBP provided them with new competencies or encouraged the use of existing competencies gained through previous courses. Extending Ramocki's (1987) findings on student experience in a Marketing Research course, Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough's (2009) study on the utilisation of simulated exercises and Karia and colleagues' (2015) research into the education of business planning, our students felt that their exposure to the real business issues boosted their confidence and efficacy beliefs.

**Extract 1.** I know marketing basics, and all those things, but when you start doing the project on the company, it's not like Apple or Ikea. Everyone knows marketing – you already have idea – but when you start from a new company, new industry, new country, everything's new but you're still applying the same concepts, same models. It actually highlights again, 'Oh these models you can apply everywhere. It's not only Apple, or Ikea.' It actually highlights that they're universal. They're something you can use for example, for your future job; so you don't maybe need to know all the industry, don't know everything. You just need to have these basic tools, and you know them, and just know how to apply, and you go and apply them.

**Extract 2.** Obviously there was a lot more research and I don't find that in any of the jobs I have had so far that a lot of the marketing recommendations are informed by as much research. So I think it was very useful to find where to go to get that research and gave me a better appreciation of the value of using research to inform decisions rather than making decisions on a whim.

The first extract exemplifies that the student has become conscious of the general applicability of what they had learned, and that this is a tool they can use during future employment ('They're something you can use...for your future job... You just need to have these basic tools... and just know how to apply, and you go and apply them'). The second extract shows that the LBP was also useful for students with work experience. Having worked previously in the industry, this student had already gained a great deal of experience and knowledge. This project provided them with an opportunity to assess this experience, reminding them that they had the tools to base their decisions on research ('gave me a better appreciation of the value of using research to inform decisions').

These two extracts about efficacy beliefs demonstrate that a LBP is an opportunity to remind students of the tools they have

gained throughout their degrees, highlighting the value and potential these tools represent.

### *Career preparedness*

An important benefit of the LBP is the promotion of employability skills and career awareness, a central issue in higher education (Baker and Henson, 2010; Ishengoma and Vaaland, 2016). Talking about the LBP as a preparation for life following graduation was a typical feature of the focus group discussions.

**Extract 3.** I think it makes sense what you just said about it being a final semester, third year course, like sending you out there.

**Extract 4.** It's a good experience to – do the business like it's real. & I think – and it's very hard – it's kind of good chance to bring us to reality, because we are about to graduate.

**Extract 5.** I also felt like it's practical, and kind of gives you a snapshot into what you want to do after uni.

The patterns of talk about career preparation – as shown in extracts 3 and 4 – suggest that students felt like the live business project was something of a stepping stone between scholarship and life after university ('sending you out there'). When compared with the students' talk about the LBP endowing them with confidence for the future, this pattern of talk was more abstract and dealt more with students feeling ready to progress through stages of life ('like sending you out there', 'bring us to reality, because we are about to graduate'). Students felt that the LBP were a lens for them to see into a possible future ('gives you a snapshot into what you want to do after uni').

### *Knowledge mobilisation*

We also observed students orienting to their future plans to turn their knowledge into business practice. Indeed, usage of real clients enables real learning (Kramer-Simpson et al., 2015; Ramocki, 1987), in which students can successfully demonstrate their ability to apply theories and concepts into business practice (Elam and Spotts, 2004; Roth and Smith, 2009).

**Extract 6.** The fact that you're doing it for a company and it's a practical thing that you're going to do in the future, I think that makes it more relevant – and using all that we have been learning the last three semesters.

**Extract 7.** I think it's important to learn theories but it's more important to apply the theories in practice. So if we have the experience of a live project like this, it's easier for us to learn how to apply those theories which we learned and get the

whole of marketing: how to do it and how it is actually done in practice.

The LBP provided a chance for students to mobilise the knowledge that they have gained in their university study ('using all that we have been learning the last three semesters'). Students suggested that the LBP was a practical outlet which complemented their theoretical foundations ('it's important to learn theories but it's more important to apply the theories'). Students saw this knowledge mobilisation as what they would be engaged in during employment ('it's a practical thing that you're going to do in the future').

### Project orientation

A common thread throughout the focus groups was how students talked about the immediate benefits of a LBP as part of their course. Experiential learning provides concrete experiences for students (Elam and Spotts, 2004), and students discussed how this facilitates a stimulating learning process. This includes the greater engagement and an enhanced sense of work ownership with LBP than other assessments they had experienced before.

#### *Coursework engagement and commitment*

The focus group data reveal that part of the value in LBP for students is that they offer improved engagement with the course.

**Extract 8.** I think I personally would have preferred doing this one, just for the fact it has taken a lot of time but I personally enjoyed doing that, as compared with the one I just want to get rid of, although that subject is what I want to do in the future. But still it's 40% on one essay. I just write in five, six hours and get done with it. Whereas this has taken so much time but it's just the amount of interest it develops.

**Extract 9.** I've never done a project like this in any of my other subjects, they've all been like, 'write an assignment about this fake business.' So I found it really interesting, and really good, and I would do it again. And I remember at the beginning looking at the course outline, and I was really daunted. I was like, 'Oh my god. What have I got myself into? I don't want to...' And there have been times when I've been like, 'Oh why did I do this?' But it's been a good experience, and it's been worthwhile.

These extracts reveal that students found that the greater engagement with the LBP helped to drive their motivation despite difficulty and time constraints ('it has taken a lot of time but I personally enjoyed doing that', 'there have been times when I've been like, 'oh why did I do this?' but it's been a good experience, and it's been worthwhile'). Students compared the LBP favourably against 'traditional' forms of assessment, saying that they preferred it even over other subjects that might be more relevant to their career path because of the interest developed. This finding offers new insights into the benefits of LBP that have not been fully articulated in previous empirical studies.

#### *Ownership*

The other main theme regarding the immediate value of the LBP was a sense of ownership over their work, evident in the pride and hope with which students talked about their assessment.

**Extract 10.** I think this course also taught me to push myself. I've never had to push myself. I'd reach a point and say, 'Okay I have to do it.' But this course – and then with my personal life going on – it's just made me like push myself to the extreme, it's just really nice.

**Extract 11.** I have to say it makes me feel more proud to be a commerce student, because you have all these engineering and science students talking to us about what they do, and we're like, 'No, well we get to meet up with a real client too.' I think especially for marketing courses it's something that they usually don't.

**Extract 12.** The idea that they might actually implement it in real life would definitely be a good feeling.

The three extracts above show the feeling of ownership students felt on three levels: a personal level, a university level, and at an industry level. First, the LBP helped students to work to levels they may have not previously considered. ('I've never had to push myself'). Extract 11 shows that the LBP helped to instil a sense of pride about their course within the wider university community ('you have all these engineering and science students talking to us about what they do, and we're like, "no, well we get to meet up with a real client too"'). This sense of pride was also evident in talk about the broader community ('that they might actually implement it in real life would definitely be a good feeling').

### External orientation

One of the dominant themes across the focus groups was the way that students were able to situate their work beyond the immediate university context, and how the experience with an industry partner allowed them to explore a wider sense of the world.

#### *Responsibility and accountability*

Students noted that the opportunity to work on a LBP gave their work a context beyond what other forms of assessment were perhaps able to offer.

**Extract 13.** It's one of those practical things – I could see myself having to do this kind of thing in the real world – it's not like I'm writing this assignment for my lecturer.

**Extract 14.** You know that you're presenting to them, and it's an actual company, and actual recommendations that they could take into account, which also does make it difficult, because it's a company that you wouldn't have chosen on your own. So it's more difficult to find information on them, and come up with different examples, and recommendations.

The LBP was shown to have responsibilities beyond what other courses may offer ('not like I'm writing this for my lecturer') which may encourage students to work harder or at least more productively. Indeed the broader context of the LBP was also said to be more difficult than students may have imagined ('it's more difficult to find information..., come up with different examples, and recommendations'). In traditional assessments that simulate business plans, students may opt to work on industries or markets more familiar to them. This may have added an extra challenge for students ('it's a company that you wouldn't have chosen on your own'). Hence, compared to the usage of electronic simulation of a business case, LBP offers an additional benefit of developing students' sense of accountability and responsibility as students do take into account the practical side of their recommendations for the business clients.

#### *Limitations*

Personal and practical limitations were also a concern in the LBP in ways that they may not have been for other types of assessment.

**Extract 15.** I think working with people who don't have any work experience makes it difficult too because they are not bringing that in to the course. Particularly people without any marketing background, as well... it was probably another challenge as they don't have a lot of the basics under their belts.

**Extract 16.** I think we've learnt how to work under limitations, because there was like small and medium enterprise, and because our client wasn't – he doesn't have much international experience, and he's not really willing to travel and stuff like that. We all had to come up with a way to work that out, and stuff like that. So it's like real world limitations.

Working with a group of people with different skill sets may have presented students with difficulty. The student from extract 15 found that their extra work experience was an added challenge. In a LBP context this may be frustrating as one student may feel they are taking the majority of the responsibility for the work. While this is a problem in other courses as well, the real-world nature of the LBP may make this more stressful than in other types of projects. Indeed, stress associated with work integrated learning can be attributed to the fluctuating requirements of the workplace hosts, as well as tighter deadlines with real world consequences, giving students an elevated sense of urgency in regards to their work (Xia et al., 2015). Such stress can be exacerbated when the students are inexperienced, and thus suffer from a lack of confidence operating within the workplace (Jackson, 2015). This finding is important, as it has been traditionally under-researched in business/marketing education, despite the recognition of its importance in other educational contexts such as nursing (Alzayyat & Al-Gamal, 2014) and medical (Abdulghani et al., 2014) education.

The practical limitations about the LBP were also raised by students (as in extract 16), finding that it was difficult to deal with how meetings with clients would work ('he's not really willing to travel'), and that client experience may not be as limitless as in simulated projects ('our client doesn't have much international experience').

It could be argued that these external limitations are ones that students are likely to experience after graduation while in the workplace as well. Thus, although difficult, the opportunity to deal with external limitations may also encourage students to work innovatively and creatively. Some students, however, said that it was helpful to them to them that they 'learnt to work under limitations'.

#### *Beyond coursework experience*

As might be expected due to the nature of the projects, it was typical to see students orienting to the external experience gained through the LBP during their focus group discussions.

**Extract 17.** Not just memorise all the theory, have a chance to apprentice. It's a nice experience, although it's a heavy workload. Every week we had to submit [research progress] – but it's a nice.

**Extract 18.** I don't know whether I'm speaking for the rest, but I really feel more confident to go out after university. Because I kind of understand what it is now. How in-depth you have to go into things. It's not just – like it just gives an experience outside of university as well.

As can be seen in extract 17, the LBP experience was more than simply being a university student, and more like an apprenticeship ('not just memorise all the theory, have a chance to apprentice'). The opportunity to apprentice gave students extra insight into the way that real business works ('more confident to go out...because I kind of understand what it is now'). This orientation to how ex-

perience showed to students how the lessons learned in university might fit into the broader world.

#### **Implications and future research directions**

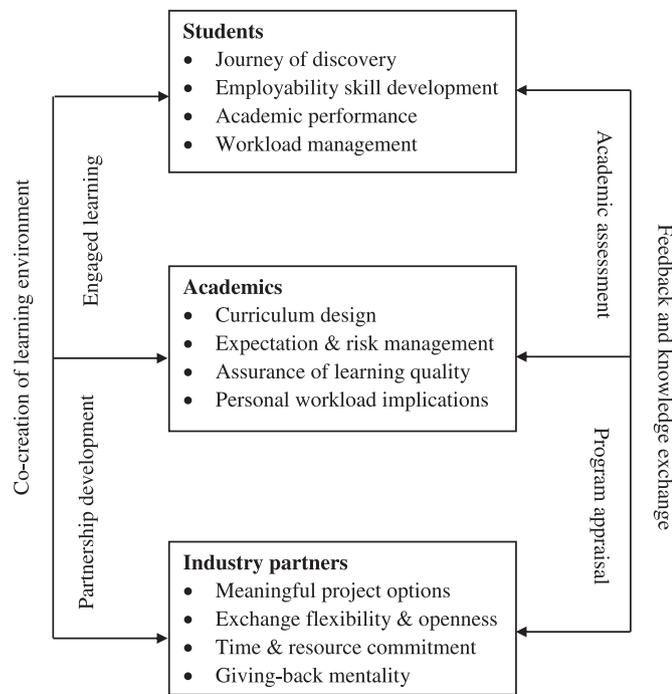
According to Roth and Smith (2009), business education must focus on a high level of student interaction in curriculum, to satisfy the requirements of today's students as 'active learners'. Our aim in the current research has been to explore students' overall experience of the live business projects but we note that there are other important issues to address before business educators adopt the usage of live business clients in their courses. In this context, the presence of real-life businesses in student projects contributes to closing the gaps between theory and practice in the education of future business professionals (Bove and Davies, 2009; Valenzuela et al., 2017). Our findings show that students engaged in live business projects found them to be useful for (i) giving them confidence, preparing them, and teaching them knowledge mobilisation skills for the future, (ii) making them 'active learners' both engaged with their work and taking ownership of their work on a personal level, a university level, and at an industry level, and (iii) giving them responsibility and accountability, teaching them about personal and practical limitations, and giving them experience beyond their coursework. The inclusion of live business projects in the curriculum addresses the ever increasing pressure on universities by the government and other stakeholders to provide students with opportunities to acquire, develop, and improve relevant skills and attributes stipulated by industry (Thomas and Busby, 2003).

Three major themes from the focus group data were discussed: the future orientation of LBP, the immediate project orientation of the LBP, and the external orientation of the LBP. In general, students had a lot of positive feedback with regard to their experiences with LBP, but the findings also raised issues that business educators should be aware of when implementing such projects within their curricula.

First, in relation to the theme of future orientation, it appeared that students were able to recognise that the LBP improved their feelings of self-efficacy through working on a real-life project, which in turn increased their feeling of career preparedness after university. Further, the LBP provided an opportunity for students not just to learn theories and concepts but also to apply them within the course assessment. Thus our findings enrich the work of Knight and Yorke (2003) who provide suggestions of practical ways of enhancing student employability (which include work experience, entrepreneurship modules, careers advice, and portfolios of achievement) by emphasising the role of LBP in improving students' readiness to work.

Second, in terms of the project orientation theme, students discussed how LBP offered a way for students to engage in their assessment and take ownership of their work to a greater extent than traditional assessment methods. Kahn (2014) theorises that student engagement may be shaped by either taking responsibility, evading learning, or by alienating themselves from their studies. Within this model, the LBP fosters an engagement of taking responsibility, as the real-world client context makes it difficult for students to avoid taking responsibility for their project.

Last, in terms of the external orientation of students' LBP projects, students found the opportunity to move beyond traditional coursework experience helpful. However, the external orientation theme also highlighted some of the issues that arise from real-world assessment pieces including concerns about varied skill levels, the availability of external stakeholders, and the increased demands of responsibility and accountability. An implication of this finding is that educators should be aware of such limitations while developing curricula with LBP. While our findings suggest there are many positive aspects of such assessment tasks, they



**Fig. 1.** Responsibility and opportunity framework for successful WIL implementation.

may also challenge students beyond the scope of traditional assessments as they negotiate these external factors.

Indeed, students' professional engagement with the business community is listed as one of the key accreditation standards of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB, 2017). Consistent with AACSB's view, research by the Association of Business Schools in the UK (ABS, 2014) emphasises the need for sustained relationships between business schools, employers and professional bodies to improve curricula design, thereby strengthening practical experience and skills for business graduates. These skills include communication skills, interpersonal skills, a global mindset, business-ready mindset, and strong ethical values (ABS, 2014). Likewise, the notion of fostering university-industry linkages is also a key strategic priority of the Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC), the peak representative body of business schools and faculties in Australia's higher education sector. The organisation is committed to promote and disseminate best practice in innovative experiential learning achieved through engagement with business sector and the wider community (ABDC, 2016). An examination of the strategic directions of ABDC member organisations indicates that the majority of these institutions explicitly emphasise the importance of engagement with industry partners in their strategic plans in order to not only foster research linkages but also educational endeavours. The findings of the current study extend our understandings of the benefits and challenges in WIL, which will assist educators to meet the emerging requirements in the higher education sector.

The implementation of LBP in the current study addresses Herrington and Herrington's (2005) call for an authentic learning environment that is content rich, learner-centred, practically relevant, and effective. It has delivered an effective approach to learning that translates declarative knowledge into functioning knowledge (Biggs and Tang, 2007), fostering better learning outcomes for the students. Drawing from the research findings and taking into account the personal experience of the first author who championed and led the implementation of the focal WIL initiative from 2011 to 2016, we have shown in Fig. 1 some implications for the

academics, students, and industry partners in terms of their opportunities and responsibilities in this WIL initiative.

While our study enriches existing knowledge on WIL outcomes, it solely focuses on the usage of live business projects for business students. In the focal context of the International Business Plan Competition in this study, the course convenor attempted to expand the applicability of this initiative beyond the business discipline through the potential inclusion of visual arts and design students from another institution. The vision at the time was that visual arts and design students might be involved in the design of communication materials, which could be key elements to the proposed international communication strategies developed for the live business clients in the competition. However, this 'extension' of the competition to include visual arts and design students did not eventuate due to challenges on cross-institutional coordination, semester timing, differences in curriculum designs, and waning interest from other academic counterparts.

In Australia, thanks to the funding programs from the federal government such as the New Colombo Plan or the Endeavour Mobility funding schemes, universities have implemented various interdisciplinary WIL projects overseas (e.g., community projects in developing countries on sustainable farming, renewable energy, education and social development that attract students from various disciplines such as Business, Engineering, Sciences, Law, and Social Sciences). Despite the growth of these types of WIL programs, there has been limited scholarly attention. Hence, future academic and research endeavours can investigate the commonality and differences in the process, merits, and outcomes of different types of single-disciplined or multi-disciplinary WIL approaches (e.g., LBP, simulations, service learning, internship placements) and their impact on the career paths of students in different academic fields.

While our findings extend the body of work highlighting the benefits of WIL in the higher education sector, there remain several future research directions. Future studies should focus on the challenges and barriers associated with participation in work integrated learning across the perspectives of students, academics, universities and industry partners. Enquiries on how such barriers and challenges can be overcome will provide a more holistic perspective on WIL and its impact on contemporary business education. Scholars can also take into account the extent to which the contextual differences of WIL (e.g., the university or the workplace, urban or remote locations of the project, domestic or international settings) in driving students' learning experience and consequently their skill development. Finally, a longitudinal study assessing when, whether and the extent to which the skills and experience acquired as a result of short-term work integrated learning initiative can have a longer term and positive impact on student employability.

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