

Students' perceptions matter: An evaluation study to improve short-term online work-integrated learning

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The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted life, leading to travel restrictions, social distancing, remote work, and home schooling. During its peak, many in-person, international work-integrated learning (WIL) programs, such as study tours, shifted online. As higher education evolves post-pandemic, online WIL remains popular for its flexibility, inclusivity, and scalability. This study applies an evaluation research framework to investigate participants' perceptions of an online international WIL program co-designed with a third-party provider, Make A Difference Travel (MAD). A case study methodology with mixed methods was used to evaluate a single Australian university program focused on social entrepreneurship and sustainability in the Philippines. Originally an in-person experience, the program was re-designed for online delivery. The results highlight challenges faced by participants and employability skills developed, leading to key recommendations to enhance online, short-term international WIL.

Keywords: Work-integrated learning, online learning employability skills, short-term study abroad, international education

Work-integrated learning (WIL) is a pedagogical framework that aids in understanding and incorporating interconnections between theory and industry-based practice (Cooper et al., 2010; Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023). Typically, WIL programs, such as placements, co-op, industry-linked practicums, and industry and community-based projects are considered instrumental in improving participants' job marketability, career prospects, and advancement (see, e.g., Bowen & Pennaforte, 2017; Hains-Wesson & Appleby, 2017; Hains-Wesson & Ji, 2020). However, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed WIL program design and delivery, especially when they are offered internationally, such as study tours. When study tours incorporate student, teacher and industry they are often classified as a type of non-placement WIL offering (Hains-Wesson & Appleby, 2017). According to a survey analysis conducted by the International Association of Universities (IAU), COVID-19 has had a dramatic impact on international WIL programs, such as study tours. For instance, 89% (of 424) of higher education institutions cancelled some type of study abroad program with 33% terminating all exchange programs (Marinoni et al., 2020). Additionally, thousands of students who were engaged with organizations around the globe needed to transition to work from home, with little to no time to prepare (Pretti et al., 2020; Salm et al., 2023). Consequently, online international education, such as short-term study abroad and/or collaborative online learning activities increased, with 60% of higher education institutions enhancing their digital infrastructures and shifting to blended and online delivery and learning (Marinoni et al., 2020). The mass change due to COVID-19 disruption, as well as

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the technological revolution, has included design influences on short-term study abroad programs that embrace WIL pedagogies (Marinoni et al., 2020). For example, to ensure that these types of WIL offerings are offered in-person, wholly online and via hybrid forms, creating an urgent need to rethink mobility WIL curriculum and learning support mechanisms (Kay et al., 2020).

Online WIL is not new. It has a long history and several advantages in terms of flexibility of participation, inclusivity, and anywhere and anytime delivery modes (see e.g., Gajendran et al., 2015; Jansen-Perry et al., 2018) as well as cost efficiency (Peach et al., 2013), creating greater student accessibility options. In terms of short-term study abroad, it allows for accommodating larger cohorts (Dean & Rook, 2023; Landorf et al., 2015; Peach et al., 2013). Evidence suggests that online WIL is often utilized in higher education to not only enrich student workplace experiences but to upscale without massive increases to operational costs and lifts student geo-economic and socio-graphical barriers in terms of participation and access (e.g., Perkins & Irwin, 2023). However, few studies have investigated students' perceptions of the effectiveness of online WIL, especially when in the form of short-term study abroad learning encounters. There are even fewer studies that explore specific challenges students might encounter during such programs or the employability skills that are most required to overcome challenges during an online, international WIL program (Hains-Wesson & Ji, 2020; Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023).

Therefore, this study seeks to fill this gap by undertaking a case study to evaluate students' perceptions when undertaking an online WIL program in place of in-person international WIL experiences. The program in focus is a three-week course that centered on social entrepreneurship and sustainability projects in the Philippines where students worked closely with local communities to solve client-based challenges, such as improving business branding and expansion. The study further seeks to ascertain the employability skills most required to effectively complete online international WIL, namely study tours, and which skills are key to students gaining a critical employability advantage. Finally, the study is an innovative addition to WIL research in that it is framed through the lens of collaborating closely with a third-party provider who assisted with eliciting participants' responses to the benefits and challenges of undertaking online WIL. Therefore, this study is timely because it identifies how to better design and deliver online WIL in the form of short-term study abroad programs by using an evidence-based approach that includes industry input, and as co-knowledge builder. Further, while travel restrictions have eased, the authors argue that online WIL remains popular due to the benefits of utilizing technologies to work and collaborate remotely while increasing equitable access. This study confirms the benefits of online WIL, as perceived by participants, especially in the skill areas of time management and problem-solving skills, when undertaking an international experience. Finally, the findings help to highlight several key recommendations, relating to designing and delivering online WIL programs in terms of quality standards and internationalizing the curriculum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The growing popularity of online WIL programs, especially in the wake of COVID-19, has highlighted their potential but also underscores key challenges that warrant examination. Although online WIL expanded during the pandemic, it is not a new concept. Patrick et al. (2008) first defined online WIL as an experience where students "apply knowledge and skills to complete a real-world workplace project in a team using online communication technologies," allowing for remote participation without physically presence (p. 16). This initial framework laid the groundwork for future terminology distinctions, with subsequent studies using terms like remote or virtual WIL (Wood et al., 2020), electronic-WIL, electronic-internships, or simulated WIL, helping to capture the variety of online and

simulated work-based experiences (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018). These early definitions further emphasized the importance of technology as the central media linking learning to industry practice, forming the foundation for later investigations into the effectiveness of online WIL in promoting employability skills (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018; Jeske & Axtell, 2018; Jeske & Linehan, 2020; Schuster & Glavas, 2017).

The primary advantages of online WIL, particularly in flexibility and accessibility, have been widely documented. Gajendran et al. (2015) and Kraft et al. (2019) emphasize that online WIL offers flexible delivery modes, supporting the incorporation of both synchronous and asynchronous interactions, which allows students to work across different locations and schedules (Jansen-Perry et al., 2018). This flexibility facilitates asynchronous communication with industry professionals and educators, providing learners with time to process and reflect on problems before responding, thus promoting thoughtful engagement (Wills & McDougall, 2009). Furthermore, online settings can foster anonymity in interactions, which Charalampous et al. (2019) suggest may alleviate emotional stress, which can often in traditional in-person WIL experiences. Thus, online WIL can enhance psychological safety for participants to engage in.

Accessibility is another significant benefit, as online WIL can mitigate traditional barriers related to geography, socio-economic and disability. Holmes et al. (2012) argue that online WIL reduces travel and associated costs, benefiting universities, third-party providers and industry partners by increasing participant access while reducing financial overheads. Peach et al. (2013) and Landorf et al. (2015) further expand on this, highlighting the cost-efficiency of online WIL opens participation to larger cohorts to participate, potentially reaching a broader and more diverse student population, such as students with a disability which enhances the inclusivity of WIL programs. The literature also notes that when participants undertake quality online WIL programs, they develop skills to the same extent as traditional, in-person, industry-linked work experience, including exchange offerings (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018; Jeske & Linehan, 2020).

Despite its accessibility and flexibility, successful online WIL delivery requires specific instructional and technological adjustment to replicate the real-world value of in-person experiences. Bayerlein (2015) identifies that authentic online WIL tasks must mirror the problem-solving challenges found in the workplace, implying that effective online WIL necessitates skillful ICT utilization by facilitators. Both Holmes et al. (2012) and Bayerlein (2015) propose that instructors must be trained in designing complex, interactive online tasks that match industry-relevant scenarios. This critical alignment ensures that online and traditional in-person WIL maintains similar experiential learning quality, which includes preparing students to handle ambiguity and stress.

However, online WIL presents unique challenges, especially concerning student isolation and limited exposure to real workplace culture. Bowen and Pennaforte (2017) and Wood et al. (2020) note that the absence of physical interaction can impair job satisfaction and productivity, limiting students' sense of belonging and connection to workplace culture. This lack of social engagement may impact on motivation, well-being and learning outcomes, which can diminish the overall effectiveness of online WIL (Taylor et al., 2023). Consequently, Jeske and Axtell (2018) argue for structured support and clear communication in online WIL design, emphasizing supervisor engagement and support to help students stay motivated and aligned with project expectations in the virtual context.

Furthermore, online WIL places greater demand on participants' self-discipline for learning and technological proficiency. Perkins and Irwin (2023) highlight that remote learning environments

require participants to independently manage tasks without direct supervision, necessitating stronger time-management and ICT skills. Kraft et al. (2019) reinforce this point, explaining that students must be equipped with project management, electronic communication and interpersonal skills to effectively navigate diverse time zones and geographical locations in online group projects. Success in online WIL, thus depends not only on the program's ICT infrastructure but also on the participants' digital literacies, underscoring the importance of accessible technology and structured ICT training for all involved (Landorf et al., 2015).

Overall, the literature underscores that while online WIL holds promise, it requires ongoing refinement and empirical support to ensure effective curriculum design, particularly in collaborations involving third-party providers. Studies such as Hains-Wesson and Appleby (2017) emphasize the need for clear expectations and shared goals among stakeholders to facilitate successful partnerships in study tour WIL. While recent literature has begun to explore online WIL adaptations post COVID-19 (Salm et al., 2023; Taylor et al., 2023; Wood et al., 2020), Hains-Wesson (2017) seminal work also notes that few address the specific design and delivery improvements needed for effective short-term international online WIL programs to be successful. This study aims to address this gap by evaluating an online WIL program. It ensures that participants' feedback is well taken into consideration when optimizing the design of online WIL for future deliveries. The focus is particularly on collaborations with third-party providers to enhance learning outcomes and align with industry expectations. This investigation is guided by the following research question: What are the key elements to improve the design and delivery of short-term, international online WIL programs when collaboratively working with a third-party provider?

CONTEXT

This study examines an online WIL offering social and environmental sustainability projects in the Philippines. Recent literature highlights how WIL can embed real-world sustainability challenges into the curriculum. Brundiers et al. (2010) define education for sustainability as a blend of strategic, practical and collaborative competencies. Sustainability-focused WIL experiences foster a commitment to sustainable practices by involving students in relevant issues. Likewise, Sipos et al. (2008) suggest that sustainability-focused WIL enhances competencies in corporate social responsibility and eco-efficiency, as students apply academic knowledge to address real environmental impacts.

For example, Make A Difference (MAD) courses (MAD, 2025) is an offshoot of MAD Travel, a social enterprise promoting positive, sustainable change in the Philippines through organizing in-person immersive travel experiences. Prior to COVID-19 travel restrictions, MAD was a key third-party provider to the university where this study took place. Unfortunately, COVID-19 disrupted the way in which MAD connected students and communities in emerging economies. Instead of closing indefinitely, MAD Courses shifted to entirely new online programs, aiming to connect classrooms to communities and social entrepreneurs in South-East Asia via online means through online short-term study abroad programs. MAD refocused their programs to connect classrooms with inspiring communities and entrepreneurs worldwide through their interactive video adventures. Participants from schools, universities, and businesses met change makers who were tackling the pressing social and environmental challenges of today through technology. Participants engaged with MAD-designed videos and interacted by making choices about which story they wanted to follow.

Essentially, MAD's online courses aimed to immerse students in different countries and cultures and to inspire action to address social issues. MAD courses used Zoom and other established video

conferencing tools to enable students to learn about global issues through a local context by connecting to the people, communities, and industries on the ground via technology. MAD connected students to international communities via streaming live introductions from community members, videos showcasing entrepreneurs and not-for-profit community activities for a range of age groups, from middle school to university (i.e., masters) levels.

In terms of this study, MAD courses were offered in partnership with the short-term study abroad teacher-leads to create immersive online study tours (i.e., 2–3 weeks in duration with 18-25 contact hours) that centered on a social entrepreneurship project with industry and community in the Philippines. The program highlighted grass roots services, linked theory to practice in the domain of design thinking, which was punctuated throughout with group-based community activities. For example, students and interested community members from across the globe remotely worked alongside non-government organizations in the Philippines, helping to solve long-term product marketing challenges and/or to increase community-based entrepreneurship and local employment sustainability outcomes consistent with United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 8 (United Nations, n.d.).

METHODOLOGY

A case study with mixed methods was chosen for this study's research design. This is an established methodology, which provides a structured approach to help assess the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of a specific context or program, policy, intervention, or project (Carr et al., 2018). Due to the exploration focusing on one international online WIL program with a third-party provider for an Australian university's mobility program, the evaluation framework provides a systematic way to collect, analyze, and interpret data to help make informed decisions about a specific subject matter that requires evaluation. By applying such a research design to evaluate participants' experiences, the research team were able to use evidence to pinpoint curriculum enhancement opportunities and areas for improvement. This type of methodology has been broadly used in education research, for example, to investigate audiences' participation and perceptions in the performing arts (Boerner & Jobst, 2013) and "subjective experience in theaters" (Boerner et al., 2011, p. 877). Similar education research designs have also been incorporated into studies to better understand students' learning experiences about assessment design for active learning (McDowell et al., 2011), teaching business ethics (Bosco et al., 2010; Jonson et al., 2015), informing assessment re-design for learning (Billett, 2009; Orrell, 2011). It is, therefore, a tested methodology proven to deliver valid and reliable results, which was highly suited to answering the research question for this study (Liao & Hitchcock, 2018).

METHODS

As outlined in the methodology section, the authors employed a mixed-methods approach, incorporating participants' responses collected through online surveys conducted pre- and post-learning during their international online WIL program. Leveraging their extensive experience in designing and testing survey instruments, the authors crafted questions informed by validated frameworks and methodologies. Specifically, the employability skill survey questions were adapted from the CareerEDGE Employability Development Profile by Dacre Pool et al. (2014) and tailored to align with the study's unique context and objectives. Previous research by Hains-Wesson and Ji (2020, 2021, 2024) served as a foundation for this adaptation, demonstrating the applicability of such instruments across varied employability-focused studies. Drawing upon the established success of the

CareerEDGE survey design and their prior experience in refining and contextualizing such tools, the authors felt confident in utilizing this approach to achieve robust and context-specific insights.

Further, a mixed methods approach aligned with the authors methodology of choice because it allowed the researchers to “provide statistics and stories that complemented and contrasted to inform our thinking about the problems at hand” (Watkins & Gioia, 2015, p. viii). It also enabled the authors to understand and explore the phenomenon from different perspectives (Kember et al., 2017). Consistent with prior studies adopting mixed methods, data was documented, recorded, and analyzed as a collective research team for validity. This is a key criterion for using survey instruments as part of exploratory and evaluation WIL research that includes third-party provider input via a case study (Hains-Wesson & Appleby, 2017). The survey questions were initially designed by reviewing the literature on relevant evaluation studies before MAD canvassed current industry partners and peers to provide feedback on the design of the questions. The authors then conducted a pilot test with MAD’s previous program participants, who were not part of the study’s cohort. The authors chose this process because students and industry are central to understanding how to better design WIL curriculum. Therefore, eliciting industry partners’ and students’ views on the survey questions through the design and pilot testing with the third-party provider, MAD, assisted the research team to critique the design of the questions and improve the survey instrument. Finally, the research project received ethics clearance with all data being rendered anonymous prior to analysis (SHR Project 2019/040).

Survey Instruments

The online surveys included quantitative and qualitative questions. The surveys were administered pre- and post-online WIL program participation and for multiple deliveries over a one-year period. To understand participants’ perceptions of the international online WIL programs, students were asked to rate how useful the experience will be (i.e., was) for their education and career development on a Likert scale with 1 being ‘Not useful at all’ and 7 being ‘Extremely useful.’ Then, to better understand the rationale behind participants’ ratings, the same participants were asked to comment via open text sections in the survey about the challenges or difficulties that they will (i.e., had) encounter(ed) when completing the program. Participants were also asked to include the key employability skills they hoped to (i.e., did) apply to overcome such challenges. Finally, participants’ demographic information was collected and within the introductory section of the survey.

Data Analysis

Once the data was collected, the data was de-identified and extracted to separate the quantitative and qualitative data, placing this into an Excel spreadsheet. For the quantitative survey results, an independent sample *t* test was applied to compare pre- and post-survey responses with the aim of exploring whether students’ perceptions had significantly changed over time. The data was then reviewed, cleaned, and imported to highlight the qualitative data that was collected from the open-end questions on challenges and employability skills into NVivo for thematic analysis. Before independently color-coding the qualitative data using a line-by-line review technique, the authors combed the data separately and then collectively. This helped to ensure that the research question was reviewed as certain words were pinpointed or when they were re-occurring words, quotes, and/or ideas from the data sets about participants’ challenges and barriers. The data was also scanned for key employability skills developed, decreased, and/or obtained, noting ideas and thoughts. This type of text analysis has been noted as an effective qualitative process for the emergence of themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Finally, upon instigating regular data coding meetings to confirm, review, and re-

confirm established points of integration, a set of themes emerged from the data. In the next section, participants' demographics (see Table 1) are first showcased before elaborating on the themes, which are: (1) overall expectations; (2) challenges; and (3) skills.

Participants

All program participants were invited to take part in the pre-survey in their orientation session of their respective program and the post-survey was conducted after students completed the program. The research team approached a total of 356 participants and participation was on a voluntary basis. A total of 213 (58% response rate) pre-survey and 290 (81% response rate) post-survey responses were received. In terms of the participants' demographic background, many participants were French, Thai, American, Indian, or with a mixed cultural background. The female participants represented an average of 54% of participants with the majority being under the age of 25-years-old. Participants represent a mixture of high school students and university students (both undergraduate and postgraduate). In the pre-survey, 58% survey responses were provided by university students, while the percentage is 36% in the post-survey (see Table 1). It is important to note that the recruitment of respondents occurred through the authors' and MAD's client bases via email invitation, which included both university and non-university participants from across the globe who had actively engaged in the same online offering.

TABLE 1: Participants' demographic details.

	Pre-survey		Post-survey			Pre-survey		Post-survey	
Panel A – Nationality	N	%	N	%	Panel B – Gender	N	%	N	%
French	66	31.0%	57	19.7%	Female	120	56.3%	152	52.4%
Mixed	47	22.1%	43	14.8%	Male	91	42.7%	134	46.2%
Thai	30	14.1%	21	7.2%	No response	2	0.9%	4	1.4%
American	11	5.2%	19	6.6%	Total	213	100%	290	100%
Indian	10	4.7%	17	5.9%					
Italian	8	3.8%	3	1.0%	Panel C – Age				
Japanese	5	2.3%	11	3.8%	Under 20-years-old	99	46.5%	196	67.6%
Korean	5	2.3%	17	5.9%	Between 20 and 25-years-old	98	46.0%	88	30.3%
Other	31	14.6%	102	35.2%	Over 25-years-old	16	7.5%	6	2.1%
Total	213	100%	290	100%	Total	213	100%	290	100%
					Panel D – Education				
					High school	90	42.3%	185	63.8%
					Tertiary	123	57.7%	105	36.2%
					Total	213	100%	290	100%

RESULTS

In the next section, the presentation of participants' overall expectations to the usefulness of the program is first highlighted before illustrating the rationale behind participants' responses. This is achieved by analyzing participants' expectations (pre-survey) and reflections (post-survey) on the challenges and benefits of completing an international online WIL program, and in the case of this study, in the Philippines. Lastly, the top employability skills that participants listed to overcome challenges to successfully complete the online program are discussed. This process aided in highlighting key findings to help form a set of recommendations to improve online WIL programs, contributing to short-term, international pedagogy re-design when collaborating with third-party providers.

Overall Expectations

To start with, participants were invited to rate their expectations on the program's usefulness before and after the online WIL experience. The results illustrate that most participants (84% in the pre-survey and 86% in the post-survey) considered the program to be either moderately or very useful (see Table 2). Notably, the average rating improved over time, from 5.44 (se = 0.91) in the pre-survey to 5.76 (se = 0.88) in the post-survey, which is significant at the 1% level ($t = 3.347$). To be specific, the percentage of participants who rated the program as 'extremely useful' increased by 3%, and those who rated it 'very useful' had significantly increased by 25%. Therefore, participants' overall expectations imply that they held elevated expectations prior to the online experience with the post-experience ratings being higher still (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: Overall expectations of students' perceived value of the online WIL experience.

How useful is/was this experience to your career and academic development?		Pre-survey		Post-survey	
		N	%	N	%
7	Extremely useful	8	5%	15	8%
6	Very useful	74	49%	141	73%
5	Moderately useful	55	36%	25	13%
4	Neutral	13	8%	5	3%
3	Slightly useful	1	1%	3	1%
2	Low usefulness	0	0%	3	1%
1	Not useful at all	2	1%	1	1%
Total		153	100%	193	100%

Note. Additional tests were conducted to compare responses between gender and nationality groups, no significant difference was found

The results in Table 2 show that, in general, participants considered the program as relevant and useful to their career and educational development. This result arose despite the program being delivered online for an international context.

Challenges

Pre-survey expectations

To provide considerations for future online program design and support, this section summarizes the challenges raised by participants from the pre- and post-survey results.

Overall, participants suggest in the pre-survey that the most common challenge (27% of total responses) was understanding the issues, tasks, and activities that the program leaders required them to complete. As one participant commented, “social entrepreneurship is about humans, I am not very confident but still hoped to get a sense of it without being able to have direct human contact.” Other participants (21%) expressed that participation and communication while undertaking the online WIL program could be challenging. For example, participants expressed in the pre-survey that they expected it would be difficult to “efficiently and effectively” conduct communications virtually, and within a highly diverse team for an international context. For instance, participant A explains this challenge as follows: “...team members for the Philippines program (online) were also distributed across the globe, from Korea to Mexico, so they need to deal with not only different time zones but also different skills, languages and cultural backgrounds.”

Other participants mentioned that it was their first time undertaking an online WIL program and they also expected it would be “quite difficult to stay focused and to participate into the activities.” Some participants (11%) considered it would be challenging to learn without an in-person experience, especially when navigating the local culture and values of the Philippines. However, many participants also exhibited a positive outlook, stating, “I am excited and ready to take up this challenge.” There were also several students (10%) who thought networking with peers and mentors might be less interactive compared to an in-person program. Furthermore, they “may not be as motivated” (5%) in an online learning environment, “it could be challenging to manage time and balance other study and life commitments” (3%) and “there could be technical failures” (2%) during online delivery. Only 5% of respondents suggested that they perceived no challenges at all. Other participants (17%) acknowledged that there “could be challenges” but did not specify what those challenges might be.

Post-survey expectations

In the post-survey responses, participants noted that the challenges were different when compared to the pre-survey perceptions. For instance, only 10% (17% reduction from the pre-survey) of responses stated that understanding the issues, tasks, and activities during the online program was challenging. Most participants expressed this by saying that the key content of the program was communicated clearly via ICT mechanisms such as videos, live streaming, chats, and interactive activities (see Table 3 for a comparison of results from pre-to-post survey).

TABLE 3: Pre- and post-survey comparisons of challenges.

Types of challenges	Pre-survey		Post-survey	
	N	%	N	%
Acknowledge there will be challenges, but not sure what type	25	17%	3	2%
Challenges in understanding the issues, tasks, and activities	39	27%	20	10%
Practicality challenges: communication, concentration, and/or participation	30	21%	59	30%
Online learning without experiencing it personally	16	11%	20	10%
Less interactive networking experiences	15	10%	2	1%
Lack of motivation	7	5%	0	0%
Time management	4	3%	19	10%
ICT/technical failures	3	2%	12	6%
Real life problem solving will not be achieved	0	0%	41	21%
No challenges	7	5%	23	12%
Total	146	100%	199	100%

Note. Additional tests were conducted to compare responses between gender and nationality groups, no significant difference was found

The results in Table 3 suggest that very few students ($N=2$, 9% reduction from the pre-survey) had an issue interacting and networking with peers and supervisors remotely. Furthermore, no student (5% reduction from the pre-survey) considered that they were demotivated when undertaking the online program.

Another discovery made was that some novel issues were raised in the post-experience data. For example, 30% of respondents (9% increase from the pre-survey) mentioned various challenges in relation to the practicality of the program. In addition, a common challenge that students noted was being able to effectively collaborate with peers when there was a language and/or cultural barrier, due to “limited ways to communicate with each other,” such as through email, video, or online chats alone. Students commented that communication and collaboration may be easier when delivered in-person, when one can better ascertain body language and seek on the spot assistance. Participants also expressed that there was an incremental stress placed on them to manage time (10%) when fitting the program’s tasks into their daily routine. Participants noted that it was especially stressful when there were technical difficulties (6%). Again, students found it was demanding to conceptualize the project with industry and community partners or to produce a sustainable solution for clients that was marketable and fulfilled community needs (21%). Students also attributed this concern to not being able to visit the local community in-person, preventing physical and emotional connections with others, as outlined by Participant B:

The big challenge for me was having to integrate different factors that we had to consider such as how to address most of the needs of the community and how to make lasting impact for the members of the community, MAD, and the people who will consume the service that we came up with.

Skills

In this section, skills are examined in terms of what students perceived as essential to overcoming challenges encountered during the online WIL experience (see Table 4 for the employability skill list and results).

TABLE 4: Pre- and post-survey comparison of skills to overcome challenges.

Skill type	Pre-survey		Post-survey	
	N	%	N	%
Active learning	19	10%	19	7%
Communication skills	18	9%	26	10%
Active listening and patience	18	9%	12	5%
Commitment	14	7%	3	1%
Motivation and enthusiasm	12	6%	2	1%
Resilience and perseverance	11	6%	8	3%
Being open-minded	11	6%	4	2%
Critical thinking	11	6%	20	8%
Adaptability	10	5%	10	4%
Teamwork	10	5%	36	14%
Intercultural skills	8	4%	11	4%
Time management and organizing skills	8	4%	18	7%
Problem solving	7	4%	33	12%
Risk taking and courage	7	4%	4	2%
Leadership	6	3%	7	3%
Creativity	5	3%	17	6%
Confidence and self-awareness	5	3%	8	3%
Research and analytical skills	4	2%	14	5%
Empathy and kindness	3	2%	11	4%
I don't know	10	5%	3	1%
Total	197	100%	265	100%

Note. Additional tests were conducted to compare responses between gender and nationality groups, no significant difference was found

The pre-survey results highlight that students expected to be critical, self-driven and to take initiative when participating in the online WIL program. For example, participants said that they needed to be active in their learning, practice effective communication skills, listen with patience, and stay motivated and committed. Personal characteristics such as resilience, perseverance and being open-minded and adaptable were also expected skills they believed would help them to overcome challenges. Despite most skills consistently being mentioned pre- and post-learning experience, it is still noteworthy that

some changes were noticed in the post-survey results. These changes also reflect the challenges participants encountered during the program. For example, only a small number of participants mentioned staying motivated and committed as being essential. Instead, significantly more participants highlighted that teamwork skills (14%, a 9% increase from the pre-survey) and problem-solving skills (12%, an 8% increase from the pre-survey) were critical to ensuring successful completion of the online WIL program. Other students ($N=5$) stated that they learnt how to 'break the ice' with peers, helping them to be inclusive, friendly, and accepting of diversity (4%), working together to create a big and impactful project for a community. Students further expressed that these key skills were helpful when developing community knowledge (7%) and improving communication (10%) skills so that the team would be in a better position to make plans, openly brainstorm together on tasks, and effectively assign tasks to members. Research and analytical skills were mentioned as being essential to overcoming challenges by 5% of participants: "...gathering information through research and summarize the information into a few fundamental points and appealing to a certain target audience in persuasive writing, especially in considering potential viewers own interests which may not always be aligned with our own" (Participant C). Also,

Patience and perseverance are the most important skills I learned because I had to redo the videos multiple times (takes hours) and have multiple drafts for the same one-minute video. However, I knew the work I was doing was worth it, so I endured and put my best effort into each topic. (Participant D)

Overall, there were some consistencies (approximately 10% of responses), where participants indicated they were concerned about not accessing an in-person international experience. They perceived that they lacked personal connection. Notably, there was a 15% reduction in unspecified challenges and a 7% increase in the responses where participants stated that there was no challenge at all.

DISCUSSION

This study applied a case study using mixed methods via an evaluation research framework to investigate participants' perceptions of an international online WIL program in the Philippines. Using pre- and post-surveys, the study examined participants' perceptions of program challenges, skills utilized, and overall effectiveness. Initially, participants were concerned with contextual understanding, engagement, and motivation; however, post-survey indicated that practical challenges – like managing diverse team interactions, time constraints, and cross-cultural communication – became more prominent. Despite these obstacles, participants nominated adaptability, problem-solving, and teamwork as essential skills cultivated through the online WIL program.

The analysis points to online WIL's unique benefits in fostering flexibility and essential skills but also highlights areas for improvement. A critical limitation was the difficulty participants experienced in building culturally responsive connections without face-to-face interaction. Challenges in interpreting non-verbal cues, a crucial component of effective teamwork across cultures, were evident, as participants struggled to balance community and stakeholder needs. This aligns with findings from Bowen and Pennaforte (2017), who emphasize that virtual WIL can limit the depth of interpersonal understanding and engagement. As illustrated by Participant B's comment on the difficulty of navigating stakeholder interests remotely, the virtual setting may fall short in providing the immediacy and cultural insights that traditional, in-person WIL typically offers.

The absence of adequate structured, external feedback from industry professionals also emerged as a significant shortcoming, contrasting with traditional WIL programs where industry feedback plays a

key role in authentic learning. This could be a common issue when engaging with a third-party provider in a different country, especially in the urgent transition from an in-person to online program in response to the COVID-19 disruption, as well as the shortages of supporting human resources during the Pandemic. This gap left students reliant on self-assessment and peer feedback, which, while valuable, may not fully substitute for professional input crucial for developing industry-aligned skills. Bayerlein and Jeske (2018) and Jeske and Axtell (2018) similarly stress that effective WIL requires structured support and feedback mechanisms to help students align with professional standards. Without this guidance in online WIL, participants' reflections lacked the insights typically provided by expert evaluations, potentially limiting the program's impact on their career readiness.

Furthermore, it has been noted that an online WIL format enhances scalability and accessibility (Holmes et al., 2012), however, inherently it is a challenging delivery mode, requiring consistent, high-quality feedback and spontaneous, real-time collaboration. Participants noted that asynchronous communication increased pressure on self-regulation and that it required them to independently navigate cultural nuances, which is a noted challenge (Kraft et al., 2019,) associated with virtual environments where teamwork demands a high degree of digital literacy and self-discipline. Based on these findings, the following curricular improvement recommendations are provided.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

To help address identified issues that arose from this study for online WIL program, the following key elements are proposed. These recommendations are not exhaustive, rather they are designed to optimize the online WIL experience, enhancing cultural understanding, and to provide meaningful feedback for student development of skills.

1. Tailored Pre-Program Communication

Effective pre-program communication is essential to manage participant expectations and prepare students for the unique benefits and challenges of online WIL. This is quite different when comparing student communication needs to in-person experiences. For example, this communication should be tailored to emphasize the distinct skills developed in each format, such as adaptability and digital collaboration that can be fostered in online WIL versus the interpersonal and cultural insights mostly gained from in-person programs. By clearly articulating these distinctions and different expectations students can approach the online WIL experience with a realistic understanding of its potential impact on their employability skills but also its realistic limitations.

2. Structured Support for Cultural and Social Connection

Given the limitations of virtual environments in fostering workplace culture and exposure (Wood et al., 2020), additional support mechanisms are recommended to strengthen the connection between student team members and local communities. For instance, regular, structured online networking and team-building events can help mitigate isolation and enhance team cohesion, enabling students to develop more authentic cultural insights and collaborative skills. Consistent with Charalampous et al. (2019) and Taylor et al. (2023), these events can reduce social disconnection and improve the online learning environment's overall effectiveness by replicating key elements of in-person professional interactions.

3. Enhanced Industry Feedback Mechanisms

To address the critical absence of structured feedback from industry professionals, it is recommended that feedback loops between students, universities, and industry partners be incorporated. This should include scheduled, real-time feedback sessions with industry mentors to guide students' reflections on performance and skill development. Technologies such as the Student Relationship Engagement System can be used to provide students with tailored, automated feedback (Hains-Wesson & Ji, 2024). By purposefully integrating such feedback components, online WIL can provide a better learning experience. This recommendation also aligns with Jeske and Axtell's (2018) philosophy for authentic skill alignment will assist with job readiness that is industry specific.

4. Collaborative Program Design and Continuous Evaluation

Collaboration between educational institutions and third-party providers is crucial to develop, deliver, and evaluate short-term, international WIL programs effectively. Joint efforts can improve program relevance, leveraging shared insights to design online WIL experiences that blend academic and industry perspectives. Continuous joint-evaluation through surveys and interviews with participants can identify areas for improvement and enhance future program iterations.

5. Customized ICT Skill Preparation

Preparing students with essential ICT skills for online WIL is necessary to ensure smooth participation and effective virtual collaboration. Universities and third-party providers should implement dedicated digital literacy modules, focusing on online communication, project management, and digital etiquette. These modules will empower students to work autonomously in virtual environments, facilitating teamwork and cultural understanding across geographical boundaries.

In conclusion, the above-mentioned recommendations can help online WIL program teams better replicate the experiential and professional depth of an in-person WIL experience, thus equipping students with the cultural, collaborative, and technical skills most required for success in a global workforce.

CONCLUSION

This study adds to the emerging body of literature in international, online, short-term study abroad program design (Wood et al., 2020), and as a form of WIL (Hains-Wesson & Appleby, 2017). Utilizing ICT facilities and online materials to enrich students' WIL experiences and to improve employability skills attainment has a long history in education. However, designing and delivering short-term, international online WIL programs has gained popularity due to the COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions and the technological revolution. Despite the increasing popularity of online WIL, only a few studies have explored students' perspectives to improve online WIL curricular (Zegwaard & Pretti, 2023) or discuss joint-evaluation studies between university WIL researchers and third-party providers (Hains-Wesson, 2017).

A significant finding of the study is that the actual online learning experience exceeded participants' pre-program expectations while issues like lack of adequate pre-program preparation, on-program support and feedback emerged from the analyses. Based on the findings, it can be argued that there is a need to refocus on clear communication narratives when advertising the benefits and challenges for both online and in-person short-term WIL study abroad programs as well as the limitations and why.

It is also important that higher education institutions take the time and effort to normalize online short-term study abroad programs to increase student appetite and access that is based on realistic limitations and opportunities. The findings presented here, assisted to provide a set of recommendations to enhance online WIL program redesign. Overall, the study proposes that programs should include tailored pre-program communication, structured online networking events to foster social and cultural connections, regular feedback from industry mentors, collaborative program development, and targeted ICT skill preparation via effective online programs, such as quality live streaming. These recommendations are not exhaustive, rather they aim to help improve employability skills, cultural understanding, and student engagement in the virtual international WIL environment.

LIMITATIONS

This study is subject to several limitations. The findings and arguments are constrained to one international online WIL program in the Philippines. Second, the program was short in duration (less than three weeks) and singular in its contextual framework. Finally, the study included both university and non-university participation with limited demographic information collected and analyzed due to ethical requirements. Therefore, the findings and conclusions presented in this study should be interpreted and generalized with caution. The study's benefit and worth, is in its call to action to expand on the findings presented here to deeply investigate the benefits, challenges and opportunities in online mobility WIL, and as a key instrument to improve students' global citizenship and skill acquisition.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The authors advocate for future studies to expand upon the findings presented here and to investigate participants' perceptions of a range of diverse types of international, short-term online WIL program experiences. Additionally, a comprehensive investigation into diverse learner experiences, focusing on mixed professional, secondary and university learner cohorts would be beneficial to the field. Finally, this could include a comparison between online and in-person as well as longer time durations, diverse models, cohorts, different disciplines to ensure generalizability as well as distinctive WIL topics.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined as:

An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38).*

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ; www.wilnz.nz), and the University of Waikato, New Zealand.

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

Good practice and program description papers. On occasions, the Journal seeks manuscripts describing a practice of WIL as an example of good practice, however, only if it presents a particularly unique or innovative practice or it was situated in an unusual context. There must be a clear contribution of new knowledge to the established literature. Manuscripts describing what is essentially 'typical', 'common' or 'known' practices will be encouraged to rewrite the focus of the manuscript to a significant educational issue or will be encouraged to publish their work via another avenue that seeks such content.

By negotiation with the Editor-in-Chief, the Journal also accepts a small number of *Book Reviews* of relevant and recently published books.

Reference

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