

Engagement and employability through the Communication and Media Clinic: “Should happen way earlier, even in year one”

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Employability is now a key graduate attribute driving the design of curriculum in Australian universities. The value of embedding authentic assessment and work-integrated learning in programs to promote employability as a learning outcome is now recognized. This action research case study presents final year communications students' perspectives of their learning experience and outcomes after working with nonprofit clients in the Communication and Media Clinic, a pilot program developed with the aim of enhancing students' learning experience and outcomes by embedding authentic learning activities and assessment in courses in the Communication and Media program at the University of South Australia. Semi-structured interviews and reflections revealed that working with real clients in the clinic was engaging and enhanced employability. Students would like more WIL across all levels in their program. This article presents the challenges and actions in gathering and responding to the students' voice to codesign the Communication and Media Clinic.

Keywords: Public relations education, authentic assessment, learning outcomes, learning experience, case study

Employability is now a key graduate attribute driving the design of curriculum in Australian universities (Dean et al., 2024). The value of embedding authentic assessment and work-integrated learning in programs to promote employability as a learning outcome is now recognized. This action research case study presents final year communications students' perspectives of their learning experience and outcomes after working with nonprofit clients in the Communication and Media Clinic at the University of South Australia (UniSA). The Communication and Media Clinic (the Clinic) is a pilot program that was awarded a UniSA Teaching and Learning Grant in 2021, with the aim of enhancing students' learning experience and outcomes by embedding authentic learning activities and assessment in courses in the Communication and Media program. It enables students in targeted courses to apply the knowledge and skills acquired during their program to real challenges by working with nonprofit clients to create communication campaigns and materials, strengthening the employability of graduates and relationships with end-users. The Clinic project was embedded into a third-year course, Communication Management in Practice, which was delivered internally and externally in mixed mode and online. In 2021 and 2022 students' voices regarding the Clinic were gathered through an online survey, semi-structured interviews and student reflections, with the aim of codesigning an effective WIL model that could potentially involve more courses across the communication and media degree. Online surveys and in-depth interviews with clients affirmed students' views about the value of the experience in developing and sharing their knowledge and skills to produce useful outcomes for both partners.

Acting on feedback from students from each cohort, innovations in the delivery and assessment have been introduced each year. Many of the challenges that arose for both students and staff are commonly associated with work-integrated learning: ensuring a good fit between clients and students generating positive outcomes for partners, matching timelines for clients and students, and additional workload for academics and teaching staff. Despite these challenges, the resounding message from the student

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voice was that work-integrated learning and authentic assessment is engaging, rewarding and increases employability, not only in public relations and communication roles, but across a range of professions. This case study presents the lessons learned and the strategies applied in navigating challenges to embed the Communication and Media Clinic within coursework, and potentially a program, reflecting the learning needs expressed by students, in collaboration with nonprofit clients and the teaching staff. These challenges include enabling the student voice to be heard formally through research in a university environment.

EMPLOYABILITY, AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT AND WIL IN PUBLIC RELATIONS EDUCATION

Employability is a key required graduate attribute in Australian higher education (Australian Government Department of Education, 2024; Lock & Kelly, 2020) and globally (Bridgstock, 2009; Dean et al., 2024; Jackson & Dean, 2022; Römogens et al., 2020), with funding contingent on fulfilling government and employers' demands for students equipped with skills for the workplace. Students, both international and local, prioritize degrees and programs that will enhance their employability and opportunities for future work (Consoli, 2024; Gutema et al., 2024, p. 851; Lock & Kelly, 2020, 2022; Tran & Soejatminah, 2016; Yang et al., 2023, p. 1427). While employability is a multi-faceted and contentious term, there is general agreement that it encompasses generic skills-based competencies, knowledge and attitudes that enable graduates to perform and adapt to an ever-changing work environment and labour market (Dean et al., 2024, p. 81; Römogens et al., 2020). Yorke (2006) defines employability as "a set of achievements—skills, understandings and personal attributes—that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy" (p. 8). In a more recent review of employability literature from different disciplines, Römogens et al. (2020) present an integrated approach that includes five dimensions based on the comparison of similarities of research from higher education and workplace learning: disciplinary knowledge; transferable generic skills; emotional regulation; career development skills; self-management, and self-efficacy (pp. 2596-2597). The authors cite Bridgstock (2009, p. 37) for transferable skills, which include "information literacy, working with technology, written and verbal communication, working in teams and numeracy." These dimensions share concepts with research from workplace learning which includes knowledge, skills and attitudes required to meet performance expectations in specific professions; reflection on self and organization; lifelong learning and flexibility, and healthy work-life balance (pp. 2593-2595). Communication and public relations educators and students can refer to the *Communication and Public Relations Australia Global Capability Framework* (CPRA) for a set of 11 overarching capabilities that include more specific skills under communication, organizational and professional capabilities. For example, skills and behaviors such as "strong written and visual skills to create and tell stories that engage and connect with diverse publics," "taking responsibility for your own professional development" and ability to "identify, analyze and listen to stakeholders and their communication needs" (CPRA, 2025). With a similar strategy in the US context, Friedman refers to the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and suggests that employability requires practitioners "develop advanced skills in relationship building and maintenance... to best serve the organizations that employ them, but also for the betterment of local economies and societies around the world" (Friedman, 2023, p. 403). Similarly, Peltola's (2018) research examined 100 entry level job descriptions and conducted interviews with 10 PR practitioners. Content analysis of the position descriptions showed a detailed list of 25 required skills listed under five key areas: written and oral communication, social media, critical thinking, interpersonal and time management. More specific skills included items like social media, digital marketing, advanced writing, trend identification, forming relationships, maturity and work under pressure (Peltola, 2018, p. 43). Practitioners spoke about graduates lacking skills in communication, strategic thinking and individual initiative (Peltola,

2018, p. 44). Kim et al. (2021) compared students' perceived learning outcomes and employability in two traditional capstone courses and a student run public relations agency course, noting public relations graduates require strong written and verbal skills, critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, planning skills, global and diversity awareness, and flexibility with change (p. 84). Both Kim et al.'s and Peltola's research provides guidance for PR educators in course design, ultimately recommending that programs need to be aligned formally with work-integrated learning (WIL) to equip students with the necessary skills for industry.

Concomitant with the rising interest in employability in higher education, authentic assessment is now recognized as a valuable way of engaging learners in activities that equip them with situational and personal skills; competencies and qualities to meet the challenges of life (Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014, p. 205). Aligned with the constructivist approach dominant in higher education, authentic assessment is a means to design tasks and assessments that increase learners' motivation and enhance learning outcomes that fulfil industry requirements as it "promotes learning and employability" (Villarroel et al., 2018, p. 840). In a systematic review of research from 2010 to 2019, focusing on learning experience and employability, Sokhanvar et al. (2021) conclude that authentic assessment increases students' engagement and motivation to learn and their employability skills.

It makes sense then to turn to the commonly used type of authentic assessment: work-integrated learning (WIL). WIL is described by Bridgstock (2009, p. 39) as one of the "more personally engaging methods of assessment" and the key here is that when implemented effectively, work-integrated learning can both motivate and engage learners to achieve learning outcomes that benefit them as individuals and that are required by employers and society more generally. Zegwaard et al. (2023, p. 39) reflect on and integrate the literature to present the defining elements of WIL noting that it integrates theory with practice and involves an external stakeholder to create "meaningful practice" with "active engagement in purposeful work tasks" and "authentic work focused experiences" in which the student learns through doing, performing activities where the outcomes will be applied in the workplace or professional context. There is a strong emphasis on relevance and value to the student and the external client, be that community, industry, government or educational institution, and the importance of students learning and skill development as part of their study and career interests. To be effective, WIL is integrated into the curriculum intentionally and focuses on the engagement and mutual benefits of students, the external partner and the institution.

STUDENT VOICE IN COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS WIL

What is notable in reviewing the published research on WIL is that, while there are examples - in communication and public relations practice (for examples see Auckland University of Technology student run PR clinic [Outside the Square](#), Boston University [PR Lab](#)) and some published research (Friedman, 2023; Kim et al., 2021; Rogers & Andrews, 2016), including multidisciplinary WIL (e.g., Andersen, 2017; Lewis & Burley, 2024), like other disciplines, there is a lack of research that focuses on the students' perceptions of their learning experience and outcomes (Drewery et al., 2026). Of the 26 studies involving authentic assessment reviewed by Sokhanvar et al. (2021), none were listed as from the discipline of Communication and the majority used surveys or observational methods to gather data. Turning specifically to the field of Communication, Friedman (2023) summarizes the findings of 26 studies of WIL in public relations classes focusing on faculty and clients as much as students in the discussion. Kim et al. (2021) compare student experiences across three public relations courses noting that methods of research that privilege student voice and perspective, such as in-depth interviews and qualitative surveys, in public relations WIL are rare. Yet, as suggested by Eady et al. (2025) the students'

perspectives are central in constructing their learning experience and, as such, should contribute to the design and delivery of programs. The research discussed here presents students' perceptions of their experience and learning outcomes in participating in the Communication and Media Clinic (the Clinic), a program that has been developed with an understanding of the benefits of WIL as defined by Zegwaard et al. (2023, p. 39). This case study and the students' voices reported here thus contributes to the currently small pool of research on students' perspectives of WIL.

THE COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA CLINIC

The Clinic was developed with a UniSA Learning and Teaching grant in the context of the institution-wide Authentic Assessment Project, which undertook a programmatic review to "move towards more authentic forms of assessment that facilitate attainment of graduate qualities and job-ready skills." (UniSA Teaching Innovation Unit 2025). There was strong recognition among the Communication and Media discipline that to be consistently effective and beneficial, WIL and experiential learning opportunities need to be embedded in curriculum and supported by pedagogical strategies throughout a program (Bates & Hayes, 2017, p. 89). The aim of the Clinic was to strengthen WIL opportunities in the program and to enable final-year students to apply the skills and knowledge acquired to real-world communication challenges. There was also recognition that developing communication strategies and content for nonprofit clients could be a successful way of fulfilling the needs of multiple stakeholders, particularly as nonprofit organizations often lack the resources in terms of personnel, time, finances or skills to strategically implement communication campaigns (Friedman, 2023; Rogers & Andrews, 2016; Stuhlinger & Hersberger-Langloh, 2021; Waters, 2010, p. 476; Zorn et al., 2013, p. 669).

Since its establishment in 2021, the Clinic has worked with numerous nonprofit clients including Care Flight Australia, Reconciliation SA, Renew Adelaide, Sport SA, Backpacks for SA Kids, Girl Guides SA and Catherine House. As a teaching and learning activity, the Clinic experience is embedded into a third-year course, Communication Management in Practice, with course content and assessments aligned to Clinic projects. Working under the supervision of academic staff, students have acted as consultants, simulating a public relations firm in developing a range of communication concepts and materials, including social media strategies and content, media relations plans and sponsorship proposals. Clients are recruited via LinkedIn posts and other referrals. Indicating demand, over 30 organizations expressed interest in the first year, far above a maximum capacity of five clients at the time. Potential clients submit an expression of interest and teaching staff conduct a shortlisting process that focuses on the suitability of the client project, its alignment with course learning objectives, and the client's perceived commitment to the learning experience. From the student perspective, each tutorial group is assigned a client project. Though students submit individual assignments based on Clinic activity, allocating clients by tutorial group encourages brainstorming and the sharing of ideas, further replicating a public relations agency workplace. Students are verbally briefed on their projects by teaching staff and their client – either in-person or via Zoom – and a written brief, developed by academic staff in conjunction with clients, is also provided, ensuring that projects reflect course learning objectives. A follow-up Q&A session with clients is scheduled for two weeks after the initial briefing, and out-of-session questions are mediated by teaching staff, reducing the burden on clients and ensuring all students have access to the same information. At the conclusion of the semester, the nonprofit organization is provided with the best examples of student work, on the understanding they acknowledge the student and UniSA Creative.

Given the often-limited resources of non-profits, prior experience in partnering in service-learning (Dodd, 2017; Wood & Dodd, 2010a, 2010b), and research that identifies lack of time and personnel as a barrier to participating in work-integrated learning projects (Andersen, 2017; Blouin & Perry, 2009; Bushouse, 2005; Friedman, 2023; Stoecker et al., 2010), a key objective of the Clinic has been the streamlining of client/student liaison and associated processes, minimizing demands on nonprofit clients, while providing an authentic WIL experience for students. This model allows for flexibility where students and clients meet face-to-face or online, and communication may be channeled to a greater or lesser extent through teaching staff or student team leaders. The processes used in the Clinic also reflect public relations industry practice, providing students with an opportunity to develop discipline-specific soft skills. Classifying this as a type of WIL, it most closely aligns with non-workplace WIL, remote consultancy (Jackson & Dean, 2022, p. 2) or a consultancy project (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 29), with scope to adapt the level of face-to-face workplace contact depending on the location of the client, nature of the project and students' mode of study.

The need for the Clinic to continually evolve and respond to change has further strengthened its authenticity as a WIL activity, replicating the external industry environment which sees communication consultants required to adapt to fluctuating environmental factors and constraints, including budgets, technological advancements, personnel changes and global events such as the Covid pandemic. Furthermore, the Clinic has operated against a backdrop of major institutional change, with the University of South Australia and University of Adelaide merging to become Adelaide University over the past two years. The learnings from the Clinic, specifically regarding student engagement and the recruitment of industry projects, have also guided development of new WIL courses in Media and Communication at Adelaide University.

METHOD: STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND STUDENT VOICE FROM THE COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA CLINIC

The aim of the qualitative action research (Beck, 2017; Bradbury, 2015; Kemmis, 2009) reported here was to codevelop and improve the Clinic processes for all stakeholders, with input and observations from the students, nonprofit clients and teaching staff. In the tradition of action research, this research values the plural subjectivities that create intersubjectivity in a lived context. The research is emergent and developmental as it involves the stakeholders as coparticipants operating in complex systems, working towards knowledge in dialogic relationships over time to improve the practice and outcomes for all people involved. The intention was to both modify practices as the teaching activities progressed and to collect and reflect on feedback to improve processes and activities for the following semesters iteratively. The research included an online survey with 10 open questions, semi-structured interviews consisting of 10 open questions, and reviewing the students' reflections on their work in the Clinic. The interviews asked students to describe and comment on their experience in developing materials for real clients, working with peers, the communication processes involved, the skills utilized and benefits gained, challenges throughout their study, skill and knowledge gaps, and whether they applied any of the new skills or knowledge in finding employment or in their current employment. A key focus in these interviews was how any of the teaching, communication processes, activities or assessments could be improved to enhance students' learning experience or outcomes. While the views of the nonprofit clients were also elicited, the research reported here focuses on the students' perspectives collected in 2021 and 2022. In 2021 students were recruited for interviews by invitation at the end of the online survey, however, as the project's online survey received a low response rate in the first year (7/79), the researchers decided to change approach and focus on interviews. In 2022, students were invited to participate in interviews directly by email from the research assistant. In subsequent interviews,

students discussed their preference for interviews over surveys without prompting, noting that they could more provide more information and have detailed discussion more quickly. The interviews totaled five in 2021 and nine in 2022 and provided rich data, with some lasting an hour.

The survey responses, reflections and interviews were read several times by each researcher and coded by hand and later using NVivo. Thematic analysis was used based on an inductive-deductive analysis for developing themes, “identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns in the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79), examining how students perceive and speak about the experience developing materials for real clients in the Clinic. The focus in interpreting the students’ voices was informed by concepts from literature associated with both employability and learning engagement and allowed for emergent themes and recommendations from students.

Ethics was approved by the Human Ethics Research Committee University of South Australia 3 October 2021 (No: 204243). All participants were volunteers who signed consent forms after being provided with information about the research and assured of personal anonymity in reporting.

Research questions:

1. What effect does developing materials for real clients have on students’ learning experience?
2. What effect does developing materials for real clients have on students’ learning outcomes?
3. How can students’ learning experience and outcomes be improved when working on Communication and Media Clinic projects?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of the students’ voices highlighted the value of authentic assessment embodied in WIL identified in prior research (Bridgstock, 2009; Kim et al., 2021; Sokhanvar et al., 2021; Zegwaard et al., 2023). That is, students are more engaged because theory is given context in lived experience and this leads to improved learning outcomes, including employability. Significantly, a major reason students value work in the Clinic is how it reframes their learning and their self-concept in relation to others, enabling them to contribute to others’ lives and work in a genuine sense on a personal and professional level. The students’ interaction and what they bring to the experience on the “personal and relational” level as defined in Eady et al.’s (2025, p. 232) model of WIL has strong impact on their learning and their perception of this.

Engagement, Motivation and Enjoying the Learning Experience

A key finding was how engaged and motivated students felt producing work for a real client, using words like “motivated,” “excited”, “passion”, and “enjoyed.” Several spoke about enjoying the experience because they were applying skills they had learned throughout their degree for the benefit of an organization that would value their work. Aligning with prior research on what constitutes good WIL (Sokhanvar et al., 2021, p. 4) the students felt “a sense of satisfaction” and made more effort; “actively engaged” and were invested and absorbed in their learning, demonstrating what Drewery et al. (2026) have defined as “a learning mindset.”

For example: “It’s just one of those topics where you really, enjoy it, everything just becomes easier because you’re enjoying what you’re doing” (Student 6, Interview, 2022), and: “That subject, in particular, was one of my favorites because we were able to do things that were a bit more realistic in terms of what we would be doing in an actual job” (Student 6, Interview, 2022).

I felt like the course made a big impact on how I viewed what a career and comms would look like...this course, had the most impact ... but I think feeling excited about a project and like I had creative license or there was a little bit more like-...something to sink my teeth into with this course that I felt like 'Okay, this is like I can see what I would actually be doing.' (Student 2, Interview, 2021)

We spend a lot of time obviously at university doing these sort of mock ideas in how things in the real world work, so to implement it with a client is a completely different experience, and I think you go into it as a student with a different idea as well as that brings out a little bit more passion, bit more of a commitment to produce something of a the higher quality when you know it's also being judged by industry. (Student 8, Interview, 2022)

I actually really enjoyed the project and I felt like being able to work with a real organization one made it feel more real and then I felt like it was a lot more tangible and a lot more, I guess, engaging mentally because I felt like I was really applying it to the kind of project that I would work on in the workplace. (Student 1, Interview, 2021)

A Sense of Belonging, Making a Difference, New Social Awareness.

It was also clear that it was the interactions with their clients, teaching staff and peers that added to students' motivation, and that these relationships supported the sense of belonging and growth that are important elements according to recent research that focuses on students' perspectives of WIL (Drewery et al., 2026).

I have one of my good friends in the class, and we were both saying that it was just unmatched, because we hadn't really had that experience like in our course so far. And it was just really cool, because our class worked with [urban renewal org] and they were just really easy to negotiate, to communicate with, and they were really relatable as well. (Student 5, Interview, 2022)

So it was very beneficial as well, having [the contact] come in and talk about the organization, the organization had a face essentially, which meant we could connect with it and learn more about it, and because [she] was very friendly and welcoming, we wanted to learn more. (Student 1, Interview, 2021)

A large part of the students' increased motivation was feeling they were contributing to the work of nonprofit organizations, and this accompanied a new awareness of social issues and career opportunities in the sector. The students' voices here align with Drewery et al.'s (2026) findings that a sense of making a difference is an element of WIL that distinguishes it as way of engaging students in the learning experience, while challenging them with new knowledge, interactions and problem-solving tasks.

It was interesting to see with not-for-profits that they would like you to go there and bring a lot of ideas, because they're not big – they don't have a lot of rigid structures that a big organization would have. I think that appealed to me. (Student 3, Interview, 2021)

But then, after I worked with [women's housing org] I spoke to the manager of philanthropy even just hearing her stories ... it just seems like every day you go to work and you seem really fulfilled, because, you're doing something good... (Student 2, Interview, 2022)

I had never heard of [the organization] and in my sheltered world I didn't know anything about the upcoming referendum for a First Nation voice in parliament. However, after spending many hours researching the organization, who they are, what they believe, what they do etc., I found that I enjoyed working on this project. (Student reflection, 2022)

In addition: "You're helping people who are more vulnerable – you really want to put in the work to make your work actually really good for them." (Student reflection, 2021); "Because it was for a real client, you don't want to let them down, especially being from such important areas" (Student reflection, 2021) and "I was nervous for appropriating culture and writing something that could be taken as insensitive. Yet, the more I faced this struggle I started to realize how important it was to educate myself" (Student reflection 2022).

The final student reflection above is demonstrative of the more general finding that students showed self-reflection throughout their work in the Clinic and, in doing this, identified gaps in their knowledge and skills and sought to rectify this through self-education. Key qualities of employability as defined by Yorke (2006), Oliver (2015) and Römogens et al. (2020) such as self-reflection, resilience and an aptitude for lifelong learning, have been applied and strengthened through students work in the Clinic because they perceived their input to be important, valued and as having an impact on the real world. These students demonstrate recent findings (Eady et al., 2025) on student voice in WIL that authentic experience and a sense of having an impact are key qualities that improve the learning experience, which leads to development of employability skills.

Employability: Confidence, Self-Management, Career Awareness, Transferable Skills and Discipline-Specific Skills

Research on employability commonly proposes self-confidence and communication skills as key predictors of an individual's likelihood of being able to obtain and maintain employment throughout their life (Bridgstock, 2009, p. 37; Römogens et al., 2020, p. 2956; Sokhanvar et al., 2021, p. 4). Communication skills are viewed as transferable skills and discipline specific, required for employment in public relations and communications (Friedman, 2023; Kim et al., 2023; Peltola, 2018). The students' interviews and self-reflections consistently highlighted their newly found awareness of their own employability and confidence that they could enter an industry they perhaps had not considered.

I went from not really considering PR and Comms as a career path for like the first few years of my degree and then in the last year completely did a 180 and liked it - and I was like really interested in it by the end. (Student 1, Interview, 2021)

So, it's given me a new, like it's levelled me up like 100%. I can look at Comms, Marketing, Public Relations jobs and be like 'yeah like I can do that' ... The soft skills and the soft skill development has been like really good. (Student 9, Interview, 2022)

Furthermore: "I would possibly have the confidence now to apply for a role which is a bit more self-driven" (Student reflection 2022). "So I do feel like that course helped me navigate a more professional environment which definitely has changed the way that I went into the workplace" (Student reflection 2022).

Significantly, many of the students had gained employment in the communication industry at the time of their interviews, a few months after completing their work in the Clinic. This provides an objective measure of their employability, including discipline-specific skills required by public relations, but also

demonstrates their confidence. Students spoke about how they had used their portfolio of work from the Clinic in their applications, reflecting on the relevance of skills learnt during their degrees because they had tested them with real clients in the Clinic.

But yeah, I think it's definitely been really good to kind of theoretical background on what makes a good media release, and how to actually write these sorts of things, because when I did start my job at the agency, I was given a media release to write. (Student 2, Interview, 2022)

I definitely think that, in particular, this course did prepare me more for the stuff that I'm doing now and that's the social media side of things, sponsorships, reaching out and pitching as well, so - definitely it has helped a lot. (Student 2, Interview, 2021)

Students also spoke about improvements in their communication skills, having the confidence to be assertive in making suggestions, negotiating to make arrangements, eliciting information and having a better understanding of their colleagues and clients:

I realized that not every client knows exactly what they want, and has a good brief, and that was a really good refresher into the real world. It gave me a better understanding of what you can expect when you meet clients. (Student 4, Interview, 2021)

One of the challenges we came across with [the nonprofit client] was that they were a bit more vague on what they wanted, and some of the outcomes that they were after were a bit vague as well. But that's something that you would have, that's a challenge that you would have in the real world as well. (Student 4, Interview, 2022)

I work at [a]Real Estate Agent and taking onboard staff, and a lot of that is communications. I find that I'm better at interpreting what they (staff and clients) mean and saying what I can and can't do – working around that the Comms Clinic helped with learning that's not actually a bad thing, to say 'we can do this' or 'we can't do that' and asking for clarification. (Student 3, interview, 2021)

"It also improved my skills in teamwork/collaborative working, client communication, and time management." (Student reflection, 2022)

The use of Zoom or other software to conduct remote meetings, now a common practice in workplaces, was also recognized as a valuable skill for employability by students.

We got the face-to-face opportunities in the classroom, which I think is really important. But then we also got to experience interviewing and having meetings via zoom, which, you know, is the way of the future. I think the clinic also helped people realize that professional nature of how you handle interviewing and having meetings via Zoom as well. (Student 8, Interview, 2022)

Students were challenged by clients being unavailable or changing plans, tight deadlines, and their own trepidation at facing a task in a context that was new to them, yet this test of their problem-solving skills and adaptability, coupled with success, provided great satisfaction, reward and confidence in their ability to enter the professional communications industry. In other words, students demonstrated their employability through indicators such as resilience and flexibility (Römgens et al., 2020, p. 2600) as well as discipline-specific skills mentioned by the student below:

It was an accumulation of everything that we had learned all into one course now I did find that really, helpful. Especially now, in full time work, so I do pull back on some things that I learned from it and it's very, very helpful. (Student 2, Interview, 2021)

However, when asked whether they needed to develop skills further, students mentioned the need to keep refining their writing, knowledge of budgeting and financial management, and tackling situations that did not have clearly defined boundaries, steps or solutions; in other words, how to approach real-world problems. The students' perceptions of their own skills deficits align with industry research, which identifies "advanced written and oral communication, strategic and critical thinking, and individual initiative" (Peltola, 2018, p. 44) as commonly lacking in graduates. Working in the Clinic and subsequent employment had brought this to students' attention. Coupled with the students' skills for lifelong learning and career development, this self-awareness can be viewed as a skill for growth.

STUDENT FEEDBACK IN CODESIGN OF CLINIC: ACTION, SUCCESS AND CHALLENGES

The students provided useful feedback on how to improve the clinic model and course activities, some of which proved easy to incorporate. For example, in 2021, students mentioned wanting "another touchpoint" or "point of contact" with clients mid-project so they could provide feedback on work as it progressed. In response to this, an additional client meeting was embedded mid-project in 2022. As one student explained,

The difference between this and a real word client is once you've kind of submitted your proposals, you'll get feedback, and you'll have to like, if you're accepted, you'll go back and change it to adapt to like what they're kind of after. (Student 4, Interview, 2022)

This comment reflects the challenge of managing WIL so that it does not burden non-profit clients with limited personnel and time. Many students wanted more frequent and individual direct contact with clients, noting this would replicate "real world" practice, but acknowledging this was logistically difficult. Students wanted more agency in working directly with clients and suggestions included having several clients per class, "so we could form a group that we could approach the client by ourselves" (Student 2, Interview, 2022). This would be ideal, but not for all students, some of whom discussed being stretched by other coursework, employment and life in general. The client interviews confirmed they were satisfied with the frequency and level of communication with one additional meeting due to time constraints. Indicative of the challenge of having many clients for one cohort, when students were required to liaise with different individuals or businesses, difficulties often emerged, such as the alignment of students' schedules, and clients and students not responding to communication or needing to reschedule. In these cases, the teachers would intervene and contact organizations, or would arrange for students to focus their work on a different topic. Students tended to adapt very quickly without concern, viewing this as something that would happen in a work environment. As one student explained,

Looking back like it's quite stressful, because I felt very under pressure with my other classmates who were kind of relying on me with the communication, but it was very good looking back on it like you kind of need this sort of experience. (Student 1, Interview, 2022)

In terms of direct contact with clients, students from 2021 also wanted more agency in running meetings, rather than the teacher leading these. In 2022 students were given the task of asking more questions but this was still disappointing for some students. As one participant explained, having

learned about how to communicate effectively, organize and manage meetings with clients during previous weeks,

I think we had lost a little bit of an opportunity to be able to plan a meeting and establish all of that ourselves to get the answer we want, because I really think that's kind of half the battle with these briefings. (Student 4, Interview, 2022)

This feedback led to changes in the way the client meetings were run, so that the course coordinator still arranged the initial meeting, but student team leaders ran the meetings with the teaching staff attending. However, while it has been easy to incorporate some student recommendations, the additional workload for staff in recruiting, selecting, liaising with and understanding clients' needs resulted in the number of clients being reduced to three in 2024.

Two final issues from student feedback have remained difficult to incorporate due to time constraints for both students and clients, and the limitations of the academic calendar. The first is that students who were more confident expressed the desire to pitch their final presentations to their clients, with the understanding that it would help them grow and enable them to get direct authentic feedback, and assist in maintaining motivation: "That obviously sounds really real life, but also sounds terrifying - so that's not a bad idea. I can give the perspective of someone who hates public speaking" (Student 5, Interview, 2021).

I think having a client there might have made it a bit more professional ... You kind of have to pretend you've got it altogether. I like having that experience because it kind of prepares you for that's how workplaces are - that's the pressure at workplaces. (Student 3, Interview, 2021)

Getting that extra advice and critique about your presentation skills and areas that you're not so strong in would be very useful, especially like if you're going into a Comms and Marketing role, nine times out of 10 you can actually have a presentation of some sort or speak in front of clients. (Student 1, Interview, 2021)

These explanations highlight important considerations for teaching staff in the value of inviting the client to presentations. While it may be an excellent way of promoting learning outcomes and motivation for some students, experience has shown that it may be daunting to the point of being counterproductive for some students who are not confident presenters.

A similar problem occurs with providing students with direct feedback on the value and use of their work for the client. Often, there is a time lapse between students submitting their work, and teaching staff and clients reviewing it, meaning the student has sometimes graduated before client feedback can occur. Students are keen for authentic feedback with interview participants mentioning this issue, particularly because they had subsequently used their work in applications for employment but not been able to state whether it had been used by the organization:

It would have been good to know how our assignments and how our cohort helped them. That was probably like the biggest critique I could give, because as soon as the clinic finished we had no idea of like whether our efforts helped them or not. (Student 9, Interview, 2022)

These issues of managing academic timelines with real world clients' timelines are not new, with much research identifying this challenge (Andersen, 2017, pp. 73-74; Bushouse, 2005; Kim et al., 2021). Similarly, institutions must balance the needs of students in scaffolding their learning with the potential

harms to partner organizations, reputational loss of the educational institution or individual student, along with factors such as incompatible timelines, time limitations for clients and teaching staff, and the amount and mode of student/client interaction. However, research of PR WIL-based courses suggests that more client interaction creates better learning experiences and outcomes (Kim et al., 2021) and oral communication skills have been identified by industry as a key requirement for PR graduates (Kim et al., 2021, p. 86; Peltola, 2018, p. 44). This suggests that incorporating more client interaction and presentations to the client as part of the assessment would promote good engagement and learning outcomes. Furthermore, the students themselves offered potential solutions and expressed the desire for more WIL in the form of the Clinic across all levels in their degree, including working in interdisciplinary teams. As one student explained:

So much of industry is collaborating, not necessarily even just with other comms professionals, but also with graphic designers and different people like that - maybe if there was some way to do this and future [and] We do have our internships as part of this degree. But I think that maybe beforehand or afterwards or somewhere in the middle it should also be other opportunities to do that [engage with real projects/industry]. (Student 5, Interview, 2021)

The overwhelming message from these students was that working for a real client in the Clinic had enhanced their learning experience significantly, providing motivation by giving it meaning by aligning with students' social values and demonstrating that their skills were in demand in the workplace, increasing their confidence in seeking employment. As one student explained, it increased their "70 percent confidence" and helped them overcome their "imposter syndrome," concluding "But yeah, like heaps more stuff like the clinic, I reckon that should happen way earlier, even in year one." (Student 9, Interview, 2022).

It would be good to have more real clients throughout, maybe the third year, even the second year, just to kind of really prepare you for working in the real world. Like we did do the internship and this clinic was definitely beneficial, but maybe some more in the second or third year would be great. (Student 7, Interview, 2022)

Clearly, the resounding message from these highly engaged students is that WIL in different forms such as project-based learning would be beneficial throughout their degree and all students interviewed explicitly stated that they would like to see the Communication and Media Clinic develop and continue. Similarly, the clients benefitted from the new ideas and enthusiasm students brought, but more significantly, the skills they used and work produced.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

The aims of the research reported here were to understand the learning outcomes and experience of students completing projects in the Communication and Media Clinic from their perspectives and to learn how their experience may be improved. The findings were that engagement and employability increased because of the authenticity of the learning activities. However, students want more interaction with their clients, more agency in managing this and the opportunity for more feedback over the life cycle of their work being applied. The findings of this case study align with prior research on the benefits of WIL (Bridgstock, 2009; Zegwaard et al., 2023) in making theory relevant to lived experience in relation to others in a professional context. This case study also affirms recent research on student voice in WIL (Drewery et al., 2026; Eady et al., 2025) which highlights the importance of the relational and contextual aspect of WIL for students, where their work is valued and supported with opportunities for feedback and growth. This suggests a model where nonprofit organizations could

have different materials produced by various students, as individuals or in teams, from different year levels and courses. Such a model may also enable students to receive authentic feedback from their clients of previous semesters, and work with students from other disciplines, while enabling staff to scaffold students' learning as they progress through year levels. A WIL initiative of this type, however, would require implementation at a programmatic level, dedicated funding to allocate staff time for administration, teaching and continual evaluation and improvement. Ongoing action research that involves teaching staff and feedback from a range of students, including those who are less confident or engaged, using reflection and conversational data collection opportunities may result in continual improvement.

CONCLUSION

This research focused on the students' perspectives in codesigning the Communication and Media Clinic and found that working with real clients enhances their learning experience and outcomes in increasing engagement and employability. Students are keen to take on the challenges of authentic assessment in terms of direct management of their projects, liaison with and presenting to clients as they develop their confidence, and would benefit from more opportunities for WIL and authentic assessment throughout their program. A Clinic that incorporates students across year levels and disciplines may provide these opportunities. This research also responds to Drewery et al.'s (2026) call for research that focuses on the students' perspective of WIL and contributes to a limited body of published research, particularly in public relations education. However, this research was limited to eliciting the voices of self-selected students who are highly engaged and motivated. Disengaged or ambivalent students do not tend to complete surveys or interviews, highlighting the need for other research approaches that are inclusive of students whose voices are missing. As qualitative research, this contributes to a continuous process of revision of understanding the experience of WIL in the Communication and Media Clinic, which adapts as the institution and society around it changes. However, here and in a broader higher education context, as Eady and Keen (2021, p. 6) suggest, research which benefits the entire student population by amplifying "ground-up input or lay-person's expertise" is required. Such methods might include ethnographic action research that captures observation, informal conversations and participants' reflections aimed at improving learning and teaching (Beck, 2017) or other culturally safe and context appropriate methods such as yarning circles, as explored by Eady and Keen (2021).

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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 [WILNZ](#), [WACE](#), [WIL Australia](#), and the [University of Waikato](#).

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Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL are primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of WIL and, 2) *topical discussion and conceptual* 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 including recommendations.

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