

# Wisdom on all sides: Reciprocal partnerships in transdisciplinary project-based work-integrated learning

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Relationships between students and external partners in work-integrated learning can vary and power dynamics, hierarchies and student agency have been under explored in research to date. Integrated research involving work-integrated learning, students as partners and transdisciplinarity presents an opportunity to enrich each of these fields. This paper presents the results of a case study of transdisciplinary project-based work-integrated learning in Australia. Our results highlight that reciprocity and the valuing of student knowledge are key elements in breaking down traditional power dynamics and enabling student agency, in line with the transdisciplinary principle of mutual learning. Participants who valued these elements in their relationship were less likely to frame the relationship in hierarchical terms and were more open to learning from one another. By empowering students to draw on their expertise and reframe challenges while also preparing partners for this kind of relationship, all parties can be positioned as learners within work-integrated learning.

Keywords: Students as partners, transdisciplinary, mutual learning, project-based learning, reciprocity

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Work-integrated learning (WIL) has risen in prominence in recent decades as higher education institutions seek out relevant work-based experiences and a closer alignment between education outcomes and graduate employability (International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning, 2022; Jackson et al., 2017). Successful WIL partnerships require careful consideration of the aims, actions, roles and responsibilities of the different stakeholders involved (McRae et al., 2018), including students, university educators and external partner organizations (Zegwaard et al., 2021). Within WIL relationships, university staff often hold the power to determine learning outcomes, activities and the nature of the engagement (Choy & Delahaye, 2011), while the power of external partner organizations stems from the access they control to realistic professional experiences (Björck, 2020). The power and agency of students in WIL has been relatively underexplored, particularly within the relationships they form with external partners.

Students' power and agency in WIL settings depends on the power of university educators and external partners, as well as the opportunities to challenge these power dynamics. Project-based WIL is a growing area of WIL in which power dynamics may vary based on how the challenges are selected for students to work on and whether the student come from the same or different disciplines (Brewer et al., 2022; Dean & Campbell, 2020; Kligyte, Bowdler, et al., 2023). Recent research by Ferns, Lewis, et al.

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(2021) highlights how interdisciplinary project-based WIL frameworks can be used to explicitly draw out these power dynamics and empower students to co-create responses to a challenge. Ruskin and Bilous (2021) show how student partnership frameworks involving co-creation can be expanded to involve industry partners and challenge traditional hierarchies in WIL.

In this paper, we seek to build on this emerging body of research through an Australian case study involving transdisciplinary project-based WIL. To address knowledge gaps around power and agency in WIL partnerships, we draw on insights from research into transdisciplinary mutual learning and students as partners (SaP) in higher education. Amongst transdisciplinary scholars, the concept of mutual learning has emerged as an alternative to traditional power hierarchies by incorporating reciprocity and explicit consideration of differing worldviews when co-creating knowledge (Polk & Knutsson, 2008). In the same vein, SaP seeks to reframe the traditional teacher-learner dichotomy in higher education by focusing on reciprocity and empowerment (Healey et al., 2014).

The following sections present an overview of WIL, mutual learning and SaP concepts. This leads into the case study exploring how external partners and students have framed and negotiated their relationships and roles within a transdisciplinary project-based WIL encounter. Two research questions underpin this study:

- 1) How do external partners and students frame their roles and the roles of the other in their WIL relationship?
- 2) To what extent do external partners and students exercise power and agency in determining and performing their roles within the WIL relationship?

#### PARTNERSHIP-MAKING IN WORK-INTEGRATED LEARNING

Acknowledging the importance of multiple stakeholder perspectives, many WIL scholars argue for a collaborative account that frames WIL as a bridge between the two worlds of the academy and practice (Björck, 2020; Harris et al., 2010). Spanning organizational boundaries and roles, WIL requires an ongoing negotiation of disparate understandings, processes and goals to build bridges between seemingly incongruent practices and expectations (Kligyte, Buck, et al., 2022). This education work is neither easy nor simple – it often takes time and effort to develop productive and trusting relationships across organizational divides (Choy & Delahaye, 2011; Harris et al., 2010).

Underpinned by the need to collaborate across differences, the notion of *partnership* is frequently evoked when describing the complex relationships between WIL stakeholders (Dean & Campbell, 2020; Ferns, Rowe, et al., 2021; Kay et al., 2019). At its most basic, partnership represents a joint working arrangement where otherwise independent bodies cooperate to achieve a common goal (Dowling et al., 2004). Venville et al. (2021) argue that successful ongoing WIL partnerships require each party to benefit from their investment in a reciprocal manner and educational providers to understand the costs and benefits for industry partners. Other WIL researchers have also highlighted the importance of reciprocity as a key principle in WIL partnerships (Ferns, Rowe, et al., 2021; Fleming et al., 2018).

From the university perspective, commonly cited reasons for engagement in WIL are graduate employability, enhanced student learning and the development of habits for lifelong learning (e.g., Ferns, Rowe, et al., 2021; Kay et al., 2019; Lubbe & Svensson, 2022). Industry stakeholder motivations can include social responsibility, the need to build a talent pipeline, access to labor, enabling organizational innovation and building strategic connections with universities (Ferrandez-Berruenco & Sanchez-Tarazaga, 2019). For community-based partners with a social service mission, WIL

partnerships may also provide new opportunities to serve constituents, educate people about their work, expand networks and access resources (Geller et al., 2016). Although these reasons for engagement in WIL are articulated in relatively transactional terms, many WIL scholars highlight more expansive notions of partnership that acknowledge and seek to accommodate the differing positions and rationales driving various stakeholders' engagement (Abegglen et al., 2021).

Different framings of WIL relationships imply different roles for students and partners, with different expressions of power and agency. While closely related, power and agency are not synonymous and have complex interactions. Agency is commonly regarded to be the capacity of an individual to undertake actions in order to achieve their goals, which Spencer and Doull (2015) associate with a specific form of power (power to). However, agency can also be linked to power within (belief in one's power over events) and power through (the power to shape dominant norms and ways of knowing). It is less common for the term agency to be associated with power over other people (Spencer & Doull, 2015). Hence, within a project-based WIL relationship, student agency may be commonly expressed as the capacity to take action and drive the direction of a project, with the potential in some cases to shape norms over time, but without exercising direct power over an external partner.

When engaging in WIL partnerships, external stakeholders are commonly framed as supervisors (Dean & Campbell, 2020; Fleming et al., 2018) or mentors (e.g., Kay et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2022), terms that imply a position of greater knowledge, expertise and authority relative to students. This is exemplified by the stereotypical view of students in WIL cited by Dean and Campbell (2020) as "interns shadowing employees around corridors, attending meetings or taking notes while supervisors rattle off instructions" (p. 360). In some cases, external partners may be framed in teaching-related terms, for example as co-educators (Walker et al., 2021) or assessors (Baena et al., 2017), especially if they are involved in assessment or curriculum design. These framings position partners on the teacher side of the educator-student dichotomy, potentially transferring the traditional hierarchies and power dynamics that come with that relationship.

In contrast to framings that position external partners above students in a hierarchy, other framings position them on more equal terms. For example, external partners may be framed as collaborators, particularly when involved in project-based learning (Brewer et al., 2022), living labs (Purcell et al., 2019) or other approaches that go beyond the transactional (Abegglen et al., 2021). External partners may also be positioned as learners who benefit from the "new knowledge and latest innovations that employees can learn from students on work placements" (Ferrandez-Berruenco & Sanchez-Tarazaga, 2019, p.3). These framings have the potential to subvert traditional power dynamics and enhance student agency by recognizing that both students and external partners may be learners in different ways.

While different relationships are implicit in the framing of WIL partners as supervisors, co-educators, collaborators or learners, the examination of these hierarchies remains an underexplored area of WIL research. This creates a risk that informal and unstated power hierarchies between students and external partners may be overlooked, as well as providing an opportunity for new research in this space. One way to increase the focus on power and agency in WIL research is to draw on other fields where hierarchies and power dynamics have been examined, including transdisciplinary mutual learning and students-as-partners (SaP) research.

## INSIGHTS FROM TRANSDISCIPLINARY MUTUAL LEARNING

While much WIL practice and scholarship has focused on placement-based approaches such as internships, emerging forms of WIL include inter- and transdisciplinary project-based learning (Dean & Campbell, 2020; Kay et al., 2019; Purcell et al., 2019). The involvement of multi-disciplinary student teams in these challenges can change the dynamics, as students are not only learners but also experts in a particular domain (at least relative to other members of the team). Where these interactions are framed as transdisciplinary, there is also potential to draw on the principles of mutual learning and reflexivity.

Transdisciplinarity involves the synthesis of knowledges, skills and perspectives from different disciplines, practices and lived experience (Scholz & Steiner, 2015). WIL approaches can be appealing to transdisciplinary educators due to the requirement to focus on real-world challenges (Burger & Kamber, 2003; Thomson Klein, 2016). Examples include project-based learning (Brewer et al., 2022), living labs (Purcell et al., 2019) and immersive professional experiences (Kligyte, Buck, et al., 2022).

Mutual learning and reflexivity are key enablers for the integration of diverse knowledges in transdisciplinary practice. Mutual learning refers to “informal exchanges of knowledge and experiences based on reciprocity and reflexivity” (Polk & Knutsson, 2008, p. 646), with reflexivity being the “on-going scrutiny of the choices that are made when identifying and integrating diverse values, priorities, worldviews, expertise and knowledge” (Polk, 2015, p. 114). Mitchell et al. (2015) note that transdisciplinary partnerships require an explicit focus on mutual learning, including the interactions, communications and relations between different actors. Kligyte, Baumber et al. (2019) argue that the creation of third spaces that are not owned or controlled by any one party can enhance student agency, while Kligyte, van der Bijl-Brouwer, et al. (2021) highlight how relational outcomes can be worthy goals in and of themselves within transdisciplinary collaborations.

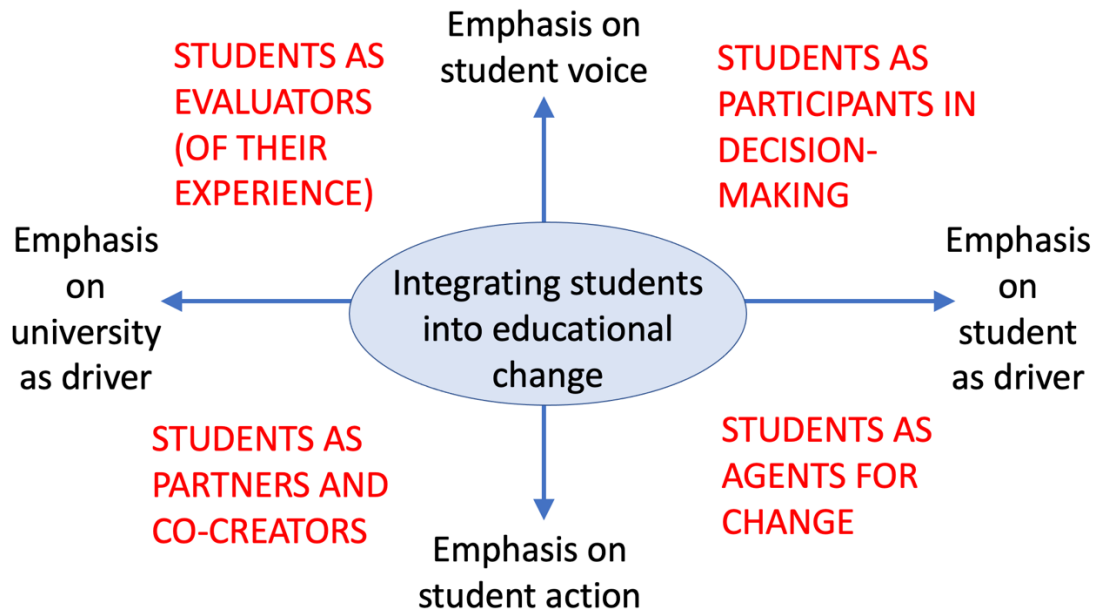
## STUDENTS AS PARTNERS PERSPECTIVE

Students as partners (SaP) is a significant area of higher education scholarship and practice that offers potential insights into the relational aspects of WIL. The SaP concept has been applied broad range of higher education activities, including learning and teaching, curriculum design, subject-based research and inquiry, and scholarship of teaching and learning (Healey et al., 2016; Matthews et al., 2018). SaP is an umbrella term that encompasses a range of approaches and initiatives involving student participation in higher education, including student voice (Bourke & Loveridge, 2018) student-staff partnerships (Bovill, Cook-Sather et al., 2016; Matthews et al., 2018) and various framings of students as co-producers (Neary, 2012), co-researchers (Peseta et al., 2016), or co-designers of learning (Gordon, 2017).

While it is accepted that very few SaP relationships are truly equal, partnership approaches are seen to offer alternatives to traditional power hierarchies in higher education by reconsidering who has access to resources and the agency to make decisions (Healey et al. (2014). Power dynamics and the renegotiation of roles are common themes across the SaP literature (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). Cook-Sather and Felten (2017, p. 14) argue that the spirit of reciprocity in these partnerships “inherently subverts the traditional power hierarchy between learners and teachers.” Bovill et al. (2014 p. 4) further assert that successful reciprocal relationships involve a sharing of responsibility and respect for others’ views, while Cook-Sather et al. (2014 pp. 6-7) highlight that all partners should have “the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways.”

Students can perform a variety of roles within a partnership, with Dunne and Zandstra (2011) arguing that these roles depend on who the driver is in the relationship (Figure 1). Where the university is the driver, students may act as evaluators or co-creators of curriculum and learning experiences. Where students have greater agency to drive the partnership, they are more likely to be positioned as participants in decision-making or agents for change.

FIGURE 1: Framings of students based on emphasis.



*Note.* Adapted from *Students as Change Agents: New Ways of Engaging With Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (p. 17), by E. Dunne and R. Zandstra, 2011, University of Exeter/ESCalate/Higher Education Academy. Copyright 2011 by Liz Dunne, Roos Zandstra and ESCalate. Adapted with permission.

While demonstrating the diversity of potential roles in a partnership, the framework in Figure 1 also highlights a common limitation in much SaP research; its focus on students and university staff as the two major parties. This gap is underlined by Mercer-Mapstone et al.'s (2017) SaP literature review, which identified 92 examples of students partnering with academic staff but only 8 examples of students partnering with external businesses, community members or end users. Applying SaP frameworks to WIL settings can address this knowledge gap in the SaP literature, while also deepening our understanding of roles, relationships and power dynamics in WIL.

SaP approaches have been applied to WIL experiences in previous research, including in transdisciplinary contexts. Baumber et al. (2020) highlight the need for explicit processes of reflexivity when integrating diverse perspectives. Kligyte, Baumber, et al. (2019) employed co-reflexivity involving students and university staff to show how liminal third spaces can create the neutral territory within which traditional hierarchies can be re-evaluated, with Kligyte, Buck, et al. (2022) showing that this can be further enhanced by leaving questions of ownership of such spaces intentionally open and unresolved. However, these examples do not explicitly consider external partners' perspectives on these partnerships.

Ruskin and Bilous (2020, 2021;) present a framework for incorporating external partner perspectives into the co-creation of WIL partnerships, drawing heavily on previous SaP research (e.g., Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Healey et al., 2014). However, beyond partnerships of co-creation, a knowledge gap remains around the roles that external partners and students adopt when they come together in project-based WIL, especially when students have diverse disciplinary backgrounds. This study seeks to address this gap by applying SaP frameworks to examine relationships between students and external partners in a transdisciplinary project-based WIL case study.

## CASE STUDY

The focus of this article is the Bachelor of Creative Intelligence and Innovation (BCII), a transdisciplinary undergraduate degree within TD School (Transdisciplinary School) at The University of Technology Sydney, Australia. The BCII operates under a double degree model, whereby students undertake intensive transdisciplinary subjects for three years concurrently with their core degree (e.g., in business, science, communications or many other fields), before dedicating their fourth and final year entirely to the BCII program. The transdisciplinary learning approach involves addressing complex real-world challenges through collaboration and mutual learning across disciplines and with a variety of industry, government and community partners.

One of the major final-year subjects, Industry Innovation Project, involves students working in multi-disciplinary teams of 4-6 students on a range of different complex challenges set by a range of external partners. This subject has been running since 2017, with partners including large corporations (e.g., PwC, Aurecon, IKEA), government agencies (e.g., Australian Defence Department), not-for-profits (e.g., Mission Australia, UNICEF) and a range of smaller start-ups and consultancies.

Partners wishing to participate in Industry Innovation Project are briefed on the transdisciplinary nature of the BCII and how this experience may differ from other WIL experiences. Partner engagement entails an initial call for expressions of interest (EoI), conversations with the Industry Partnerships Team, an opportunity to receive feedback on an EoI, a welcome workshop at the start of the subject and sessions throughout the semester that partners can attend with their student teams. on topics such as reframing, complexity, experimentation and proof-of-concept. The focus on reframing aligns with the transdisciplinary principle of reflexivity, whereby students are empowered to challenge assumptions, unpack potential biases and reframe the challenge brief that the partner has given them. This can shift power dynamics and enhance student agency but requires careful handling by all parties, which is why partners are briefed on what to expect and invited to participate in the class activities on reframing.

Aside from working with a team of students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, the transdisciplinary nature of Industry Innovation Project comes through in the students' expertise around creative methods, futuring, systems thinking and reflexivity. Students are guided in unpacking the role of values, worldviews, norms and assumptions in their challenges through in-class workshops run by academic staff on stakeholder analysis, teamwork, reframing and pathways to impact. The curriculum, including assessments, are designed so students then share these approaches and learnings with their partners and bring approaches and insights from their partners into the classroom. This contributes to formal and informal knowledge exchange and reflexivity amongst staff, partners and students which strengthens the overall mutual learning-orientation in this subject.

## METHODOLOGY

To examine what students and external partners learn through their WIL engagement, students were surveyed and partners were interviewed (approved by the UTS Human Research Ethics Committee, reference ETH19-4167).

Students undertaking Industry Innovation Project in 2019, 2020 and 2021 were surveyed before they graduated and students from the 2017 and 2018 cohorts were contacted through alumni email addresses. Overall, there were 80 student responses from 530 students contacted to participate (a 15% response rate).

In the student survey, students were asked to rate their level of agreement with a range of statements on a Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=strongly agree). One set of statements covered different aspects of their relationship with their external partners. These were drawn from the SaP literature and covered the themes shown in Table 1. A total relationship score was also generated by adding together the ratings that a student gave to all seven statements shown in Table 1, with this relationship score used to select 15 highly-rated partners for the interviews.

TABLE 1: Statements on relationship elements included in student survey

Relationship element	Statement in survey
Reciprocity	The relationship with the partner organization was reciprocal (i.e., we each gave and received something of equivalent value)
Adaptability	The roles of students, partners and teaching staff were able to adapt to changing circumstances during the project
Agency	I felt that I had agency to propose, develop and realize project ideas
Valuing of student knowledge	The partner(s) valued the knowledge and experiences we brought to the project as students
Valuing of partner knowledge	I valued the knowledge and experiences the partner(s) brought to the project
Student reflexivity	Within our student team we discussed how worldviews, values, social norms and rules influenced how we approached the project
Co-reflexivity	In discussions with our partner(s) we discussed how worldviews, values, social norms and rules influenced how we approached the project

In addition to the statements about relationship elements, students were also asked to rate their level of agreement with the following terms that could be used to describe the relationship: Expert-novice, Teacher-student, Client-consultant, Supervisor-intern, Teamwork and Partnership. Students were also given the opportunity to nominate their own description for the relationship.

For the partner interviews, 15 partner organizations who received high ratings from surveyed students for the relationship elements shown in Table 1 were selected for semi-structured interviews conducted by BCII academic staff (Table 2). Three of the interviews involved more than one individual from an organization. Ten of the 18 interviewees were male and eight were female.

TABLE 2: Partners interviewed.

<b>Interview</b>	<b>Partner(s)</b>	<b>Type of Organization</b>
1	Partner 1	Large Corporate
2	Partner 2	Medium NFP
3	Partner 3	Large Corporate
4	Partners 4 & 5	Small Management Consultancy
5	Partner 6	Medium NFP
6	Partner 7	Large NFP
7	Partner 8	Large Corporate
8	Partner 9	Large Corporate
9	Partner 10	SME Creative Consultancy
10	Partners 11 & 12	SME Creative Consultancy
11	Partners 13 & 14	SME Management Consultancy
12	Partner 15	Local Government
13	Partner 16	Social Enterprise
14	Partner 17	Government-funded Agency
15	Partner 18	Large Corporate

The interviewed partners were asked how they would describe the relationship with the students, how this may have changed over time, whether they viewed the relationship with students as reciprocal and the extent to which the students' challenged their thinking or showed agency. In the partner interviews, participants were shown the same list of relationship descriptors that was shown to the students in the survey. Partners were asked whether some terms described the relationship with students better than others and were given the opportunity to nominate their own terms.

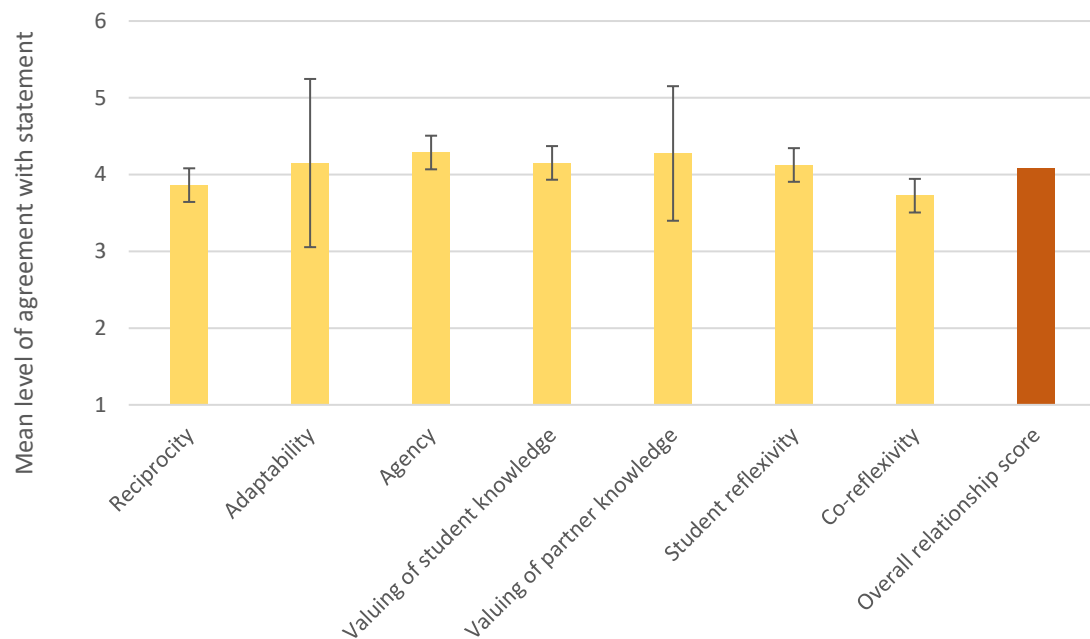
## RESULTS

### *Student Survey*

With regards to the different partnership elements from Table 1, students on average agreed with each of the statements more than they disagreed, as shown by the mean scores  $>3$  for each element in Figure 2. The overall relationship score across all responding students was 4.1, just above the "agree" level on the Likert scale provided in the survey. Student agency and the valuing of partner knowledge were the two highest-rated elements, but these differences were not statistically significant due to the large variation in student responses for some of the elements (as shown by the large error bars in Figure 2).



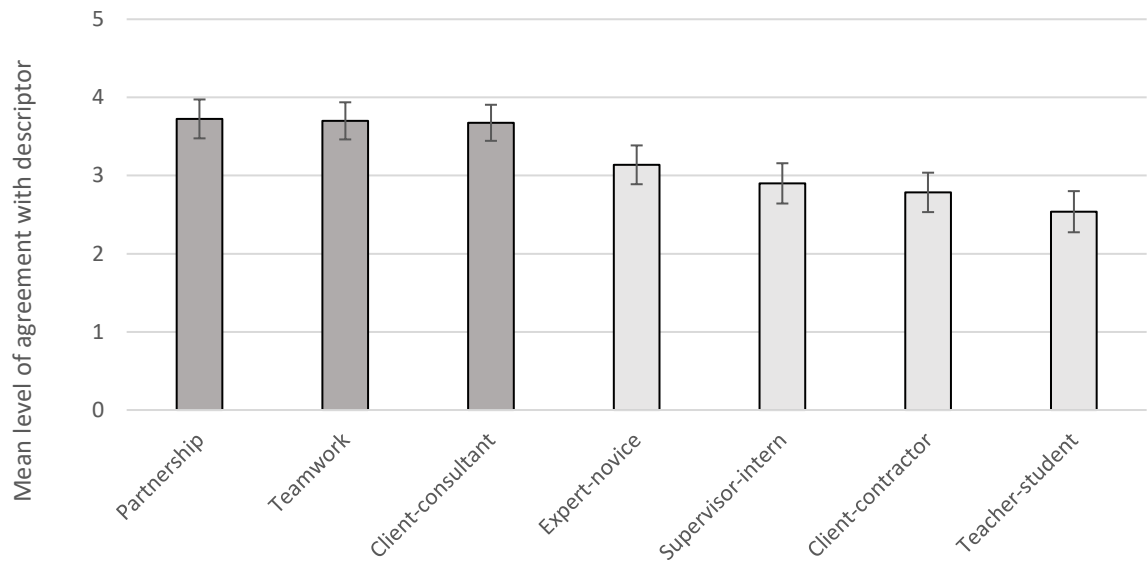
FIGURE 2: Mean level of agreement with statements relating to different elements of the partner relationship in the student survey.



*Note.* Scores >3 indicate overall agreement across the cohort on average. Scores <3 indicate overall disagreement. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

When surveyed about different descriptors of the partner relationship, students on average agreed most strongly with “partnership” closely followed by “teamwork” and “client-consultant” (Figure 3). The lowest-rated option was “teacher-student” followed by “client-contractor” “supervisor-intern” and “expert-novice”. When asked to nominate their own terms, the most common terms used were “collaboration” “mutual” and “mentor/advisor” although some terms with more negative connotations such as “one-way” and “disconnected” were also used by a small minority of students.

FIGURE 3: Mean level of agreement with terms describing relationship from student survey.



*Note.* Error bars show 95% confidence intervals. The difference in shading shows the terms that were significantly different from the other terms at 95% confidence. Scores >3 indicate overall agreement across the cohort. Scores <3 indicate overall disagreement.

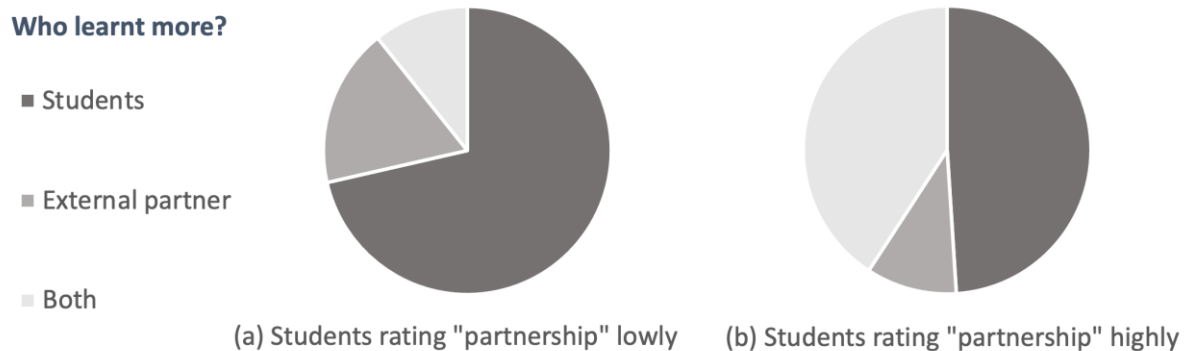
The 95% confidence intervals in Figure 3 demonstrate that the difference between the level of agreement with the top three descriptors (partnership, teamwork and client-consultant) and the other four options was statistically significant (at  $\alpha = 0.05$ ). However, it was not possible to separate the top three descriptors from one another, as the differences in the students' level of agreement with them were not statistically significant.

Correlations between a student's level of agreement with each of the seven descriptors shown in Figure 3 and their overall relationship score (i.e., the total score for the seven elements shown in Figure 2) were analyzed using  $r^2$  values. The strongest correlation with the overall relationship score was for the term "partnership" ( $r^2=0.56$ ), followed by "teamwork" ( $r^2=0.48$ ). In contrast, "client-consultant" was only weakly correlated with overall relationship score ( $r^2=0.08$ ) and the other four terms had a negative correlation (i.e., students who felt that those terms accurately described their relationship tended to give lower scores to relationship elements such as agency and reciprocity). Further analysis showed that all seven relationship elements from Figure 2 were positively correlated with the term "partnership" with the strongest correlations strongest for reciprocity ( $r^2=0.53$ ), partners valuing students' knowledge ( $r^2=0.45$ ), adaptability ( $r^2=0.36$ ) and agency ( $r^2=0.32$ ).

The survey results suggest that students who had a positive view of the partner relationship tended to prefer the terms "partnership" and "teamwork" as descriptors of the relationship. In contrast, the descriptor "client-consultant" did not necessarily indicate a positive or negative view and the other descriptors were associated with more negative views of the relationship.

The importance of reciprocity, agency and the valuing of student knowledge in creating a genuine partnership were evident in how students described the relationship when asked to use their own words, with students who gave high ratings to “partnership” and “teamwork” using terms such as “mutual” “equal” “reciprocal” “collaborative” “friendly” and “respectful” to describe their relationships. Similarly, when asked “who do you think learnt more from the project?” (Figure 4), students who rated “partnership” highly (i.e., agree or strongly agree) were more likely to regard both students and partners as learners compared to students who rated it lowly (i.e., neutral, disagree or strongly disagree).

FIGURE 4: Student perceptions that students and partners were learners in their project.

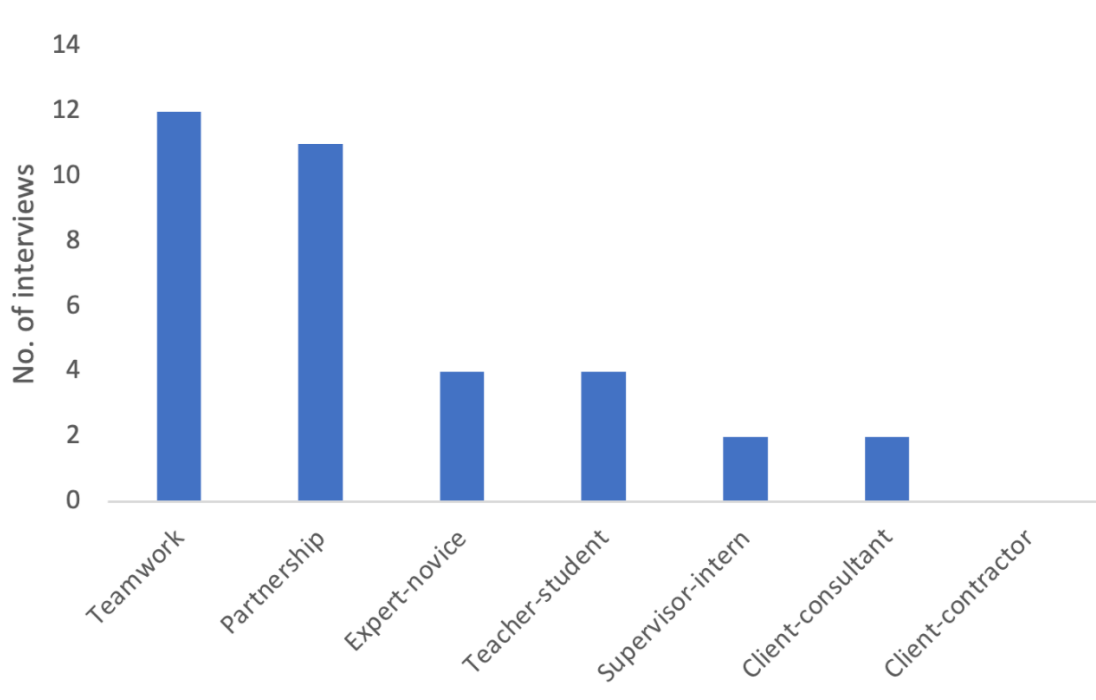


#### *External Partner Interviews*

As with the student survey, “partnership” and “teamwork” were the two descriptors that attracted the highest levels of agreement in the partner interviews (Figure 5). Many interviewees were quick to affirm these descriptions when shown the list of possible descriptors, for example:

- I’m definitely gravitating towards teamwork and partnership, I think just based on how we interacted and the way we conducted this engagement with the student team. (Industry Partner 4 - Small Management Consultancy)
- I think I really like the teamwork one and partnership one to be honest with you there...I think because it has been collaborative (Industry Partner 7 – Large Not-for-Profit)
- I think partnership and teamwork are no brainers (Industry Partner 9 – Large Corporate)

FIGURE 5: Number of interviews in which each term was endorsed.



*Note.* More than one term was endorsed in some interviews and some interviews were undertaken with a pair of interviewees.

“Expert-novice” and “Teacher-student” were endorsed by only a minority of interviewees, with most raising objections to these descriptors. The most common objections were that expertise and learning went both ways (cited in five interviews) and that these descriptors were too “hierarchical” (cited in three interviews). One partner noted that “we recognize wisdom on all sides” (Industry Partner 6 – Medium Not-for-Profit), while another stated that “there might have been teacher-student moments, but both ways” (Industry Partner 9 – Large Corporate).

As with the student survey, “supervisor-intern” was not widely supported as a descriptor by partners, with interviewees describing it as “paternalistic” and “unaligned with how we interacted”. “Client-consultant” did not receive the same level of agreement in the external partner interviews as it did in the student survey and was actually the descriptor that interviewees most frequently objected to, with three of them describing it as too transactional. Only two interviewees agreed with this framing and one of those discussed how the students took the relationship further:

I think that from that group especially, we were the clients and they were a consultant team. I think that’s a really nice way of looking at, but I think that they stepped it that step further of making it feel like at every single point we had the agency and the power. It really feeds into that partnership idea. (Industry Partner 16 – Social Enterprise)

Several other interviewees also expressed the view that the relationship evolved over time. A common theme was that the teamwork dimension became stronger over time, including with regards to an alignment of objectives, increased openness, students’ willingness to challenge assumptions and propose new ideas and the breaking down of hierarchies. For example:

- ...we just became more of a team the longer it went on for. The shared goals of what we were trying to create became clearer. (Industry Partner 1 – Large Corporate)
- [at the final presentation] everyone seemed very, very comfortable and openly very friendly and everyone was equals kind of thing, having that conversation. It wasn't like the nervous students for their big presentation and the client company kind of thing. (Industry Partner 4 – Small Management Consultancy)
- So I know that particularly, as we worked through the project and we got to know each other, there was a very notable increase in comfort from the students about sharing exactly what they were feeling, that it became more open, they were more able to share their frustrations or share their wins. And once we got to that stage, it was really easy for us to get into the real and meaningful conversation. (Industry Partner 18 – Large Corporate)
- I think it was also really good just to challenge us, because we obviously work with our clients on our briefs, and we have these set mindsets about younger audiences when we're approaching briefs, so just to hear from a different perspective, I think, challenged us and our way of thinking as well. (Industry Partner 11 – SME Creative Consultancy)

With regards to terms that were not on the list, five of the eighteen interviewees used the term "collaboration". This was often used as an additional term when discussing the descriptors "partnership" or "teamwork." "Mentor" was used by four interviewees, including as an alternative to teacher when discussing the teacher-student descriptor.

When asked whether they felt the relationship was reciprocal, most interviewees responded with enthusiastic affirmation (e.g., absolutely, totally, definitely), with learning the most commonly cited factor. Learning was seen to operate in both directions and across a range of partner types, for example:

- I learned from them. I'm assuming they learned from us. (Industry Partner 12 – SME Creative Consultancy)
- We both were blown away by how much we learned, and seeing what they were applying from their studies. (Industry Partner 15 – Local Government)
- They might view a scenario that we've been in as one thing and I've gone and read it as another, but it's interesting to have those conversations and have those challenge points. (Industry Partner 3 – Large Corporate)

Some responses highlighted the differences between students and partners in these reciprocal exchanges, with students providing energy/enthusiasm and specific project outputs (e.g., artefacts that partners could use) and partners providing support and future job opportunities. Two interviewees were reluctant to say the relationship was reciprocal because they didn't want to speak on behalf of the students, for example, "they're better at telling you what they got out of it" (Industry Partner 8 – Large Corporate).

## DISCUSSION

Agency was the highest-rated relationship element in the student survey and reciprocity was the element most strongly associated with the term "partnership." Similarly, external partners cited examples of student agency in their interviews and overwhelmingly agreed that the relationships were reciprocal. The learning they gained from students was cited as a key element of this reciprocity. Given that the partners were selected for interviewing on the basis of a favorable partnership rating from students, these results reinforce arguments made by previous authors that reciprocity is a key element of successful partnerships (Fleming et al., 2018; Matthews, 2017), that agency is a key quality of

reciprocal learning (Healey et al., 2014) and that mutual learning requires both parties to be open to learning and to value one another's knowledge (Polk & Knutsson, 2008).

Both students and external partners showed high levels of agreement with "partnership" and "teamwork" as descriptors of the relationship. Furthermore, students who nominated these terms were more likely to agree that they had agency to propose, develop and realize ideas and that both their knowledge and the knowledge of their partner was valued in the relationship. These terms are consistent with the students as partners (SaP) discourse, with Matthews (2017, p. 1) stating that the SaP ethos values "partnerships" between all members of a university community and Healey et al. (2014, pp. 45-46) using the term "team" interchangeably with "partnership."

Students and partners both agreed that the terms "teacher" and "expert" were not a good fit for the role that partners played in their partnerships, as they fail to recognize the students' knowledge and agency to research, reframe and respond to the challenge. "Mentor" was suggested by some participants as an alternative term that recognizes each party's knowledge and agency. This suggests that, at least in the context of transdisciplinary higher education in which mutual learning is an explicit goal, external partners may act both as co-educators, as suggested by Walker et al. (2021), and as learners, as suggested by Ferrandez-Berrueco and Sanchez-Tarazaga (2019).

One relationship framing for which the views of students and external partners diverged in this study was "client-consultant." Partners tended to reject this descriptor as too transactional. Surveyed students showed a high level of agreement with this descriptor, but it was not associated with a favorable view of the relationship (unlike the terms "partnership" and "teamwork"). This may indicate that agreement with the "client-consultant" descriptor had more to do with the way students were positioned within this particular subject (i.e., being asked to respond to a challenge set by an external partner) than it did with the quality of the relationship. Further research is required to better understand how the initial framing of a relationship can influence student and partner perceptions of that relationship and the level of agency they possess to develop and reframe the relationship.

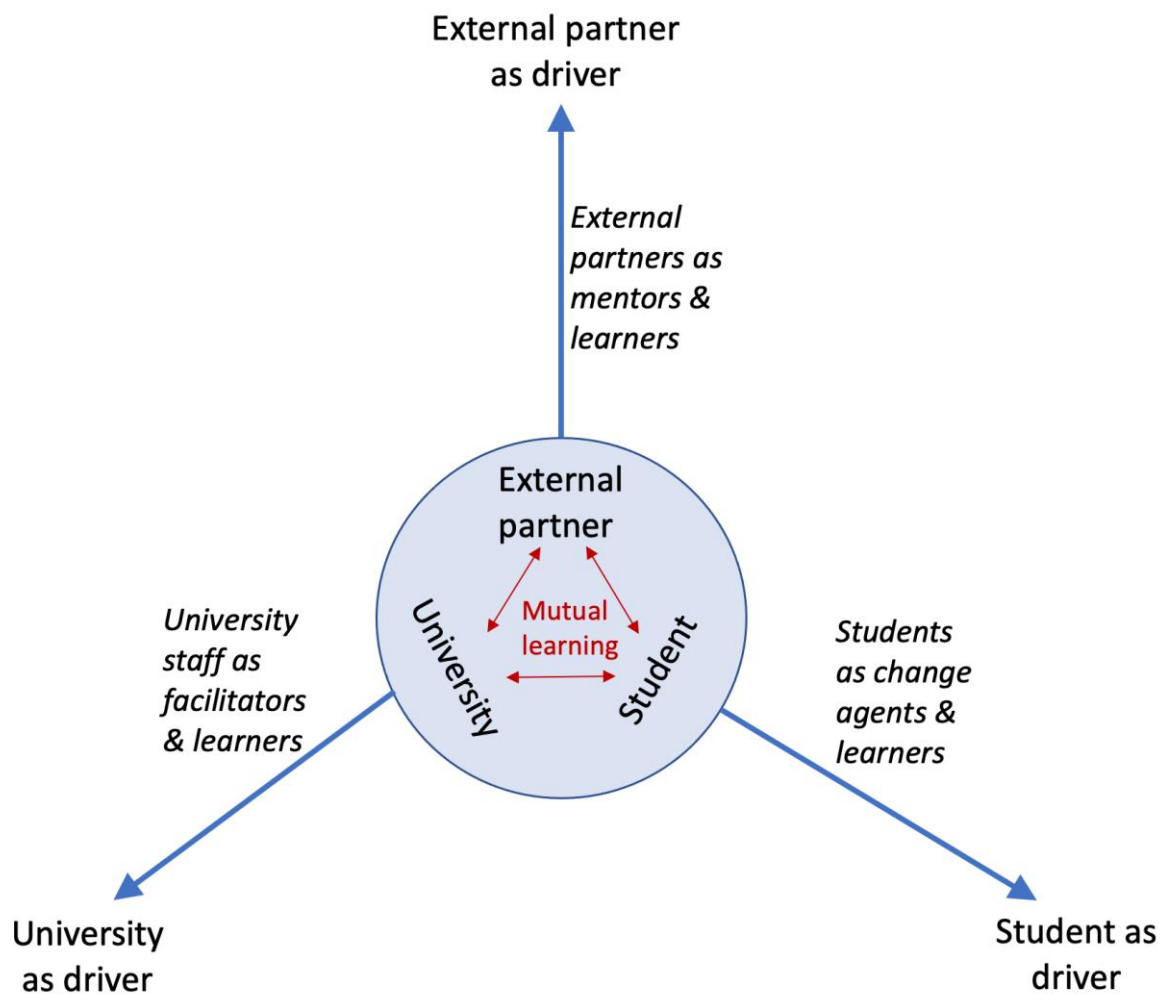
The nuances that emerged in our study around the terms "teacher-student" "expert-novice" and "client-consultant" demonstrate that the partnerships that were formed involved some negotiation of hierarchies and power dynamics. This was further reinforced by the partners' descriptions of how the relationships had evolved over time. While students may have felt like they were framed as novices or consultants to some extent, they were also empowered to reimagine these relationships by drawing on transdisciplinary principles to share their diverse knowledges across the team (i.e., mutual learning) and reframe the challenge briefs they had been given (i.e., reflexivity).

The reimagining of roles and challenging of traditional hierarchies is a key element of both transdisciplinarity and SaP scholarship, but has been less of a focus in WIL research to date. Further research is required into whether this challenging of hierarchies is common across different forms of WIL or whether it is a specific characteristic of transdisciplinary project-based WIL in which mutual learning is prioritized. Other potential topics for future research include identifying the specific mindsets and practices that enable reciprocity and agency to emerge, the role of contributing factors identified in previous studies, such as trust, inclusivity and authenticity (Healey et al., 2014), and how curriculum structures can be designed to support the development of reciprocal relationships that enable student agency. While several aspects of the BCII curriculum are designed to enable student agency, including reframing briefs, sharing knowledge and developing responses to challenges (and

preparing partners to expect this), comparative studies with programs that lack these elements may reveal the extent to which they enable agency.

Following Dunne and Zandstra (2011), we recognize that partnerships look different depending on the extent to which each participant has agency to act as a driver of the partnership process. In the case of transdisciplinary project-based WIL, students are empowered to value the diverse knowledges they bring, reframe their challenges and take responsibility for identifying responses to complex challenges. Figure 6 presents a re-imagining of Dunne and Zandstra’s model that also considers the roles of external partners alongside students and university staff. These roles are specific to transdisciplinary project-based WIL and may differ in other WIL contexts.

FIGURE 6: Partnership model for shared enquiry between students, universities and external stakeholders in transdisciplinary, project-based work-integrated learning.



Within our case study, external partners were positioned as drivers of the WIL experience by asking them to pose a challenge for students to work on. Students were positioned as drivers through the freedom they were given to propose and develop solutions (i.e., as change agents). University staff

acted primarily as facilitators in relation to following a transdisciplinary approach (e.g., through weekly tutoring sessions), student learning (e.g., running workshops and assessing student work), and partnership formation (e.g., recruiting and guiding partners around processes and expectations). While we as staff deliberately stepped back from driving the solutions to the partners' challenges or being overly prescriptive of the partner-student relationship, we retained significant power within the system through the design and assessment of the WIL experience.

Aside from highlighting the different ways that students, partners and teachers exercise power within a transdisciplinary project-based WIL experience, Figure 6 also emphasizes that each group are also positioned as learners. While this may be obvious for university students, the results of our study also show that external partners have the potential to act as learners and an interest in doing so, at least amongst partners who value student knowledge and reciprocal relationships. We as staff also approach these experiences with an openness to learning that stems from transdisciplinary principles of reflexivity (Polk & Knutsson, 2008) and recognizes diverse stakeholders (including university students) as experts of their domains (Scholz & Steiner, 2015).

Further research is required to explore the various roles and framings that may apply to other forms of WIL, such as internship experiences or project-based WIL that is not explicitly transdisciplinary. There is also the opportunity to test more thoroughly the descriptors and framings that emerged from this study in other contexts to see if they are generalizable or specific to transdisciplinary project-based WIL. Conversely, there is the opportunity to test alternative framings of partnerships identified in previous research to assess their applicability to transdisciplinary project-based WIL, including roles such as co-producers (Neary, 2012), co-researchers (Peseta et al., 2016) and co-designers (Gordon, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

While previous research has explored various aspects of partnership-making in WIL, questions of power, relationship hierarchies and student agency represent a still-emerging area of research, with notable work by Ferns, Lewis, et al. (2021) and Ruskin and Bilous (2021). The application of students as partners) and transdisciplinary frameworks can help to further expand this dimension of the WIL literature. The incorporation of SaP thinking into WIL can encourage higher education researchers and practitioners to increase their focus on the reimagining of roles and the challenging of traditional or assumed hierarchies. Transdisciplinary project-based WIL offers a particularly valuable avenue for the exploration of power hierarchies, agency and reciprocity due to the focus on mutual learning, reflexivity and the valuing of diverse knowledges in transdisciplinary thinking.

The case study presented in this article shows how the roles of students and external partners need not be bound by traditional dichotomies and can be reimagined by all participants through processes of mutual learning and reflexivity – recognizing that there is indeed wisdom on all sides. This case study research provides evidence that some of the measures undertaken to enhance agency and challenge traditional power hierarchies in the BCII program have been successful in generating a sense of partnership amongst students and partners. These measures include empowering students to design their own response to a partner challenge, encouraging all participants to share their knowledge and value one another's knowledge, the inclusion of explicit processes for reframing a partner's challenge and partner briefings to ensure that all parties know what to expect. While these characteristics may be inherent to transdisciplinary project-based WIL, they are not unique to it and could be applied to, or adapted for, other WIL experiences.



While WIL scholarship can benefit from cross-fertilization with SaP frameworks and transdisciplinary principles, it is also true that SaP scholarship stands to benefit from a stronger focus on the roles and experiences of external partners, as this has been an under-researched area of the SaP literature (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). WIL in higher education offers a rich and diverse body of principles, frameworks and case studies to be explored through the lens of partnership. Transdisciplinary project-based WIL is but one component of this broader array of WIL experiences, albeit one that offers promising opportunities to further unpack the factors that can enable mutual learning, including reflections on expertise, power, agency and reciprocity.

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*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\*).*

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Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is of 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.

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