

## **Integrating Experiential Real-World Learning in Undergraduate Degrees: Maximizing Benefits and Overcoming Challenges**

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**Abstract :** One of the most important roles of higher education professionals is to ensure that graduates have excellent employment prospects. This means providing students with the skills necessary to be immediately effective in the workplace. Increasingly, universities are seeking to achieve this by moving from lecture-based and campus-delivered curricula to more varied delivery, which takes students out of their academic comfort zone and allows them to engage with, and be challenged by, real world issues. One popular approach is integration of problem-based learning (PBL) projects into curricula. However, although the potential benefits of PBL are considerable, it can be difficult to devise projects that are meaningful, such that they can be regarded as mere 'hoop jumping' exercises. This study examines three-way partnerships between academics, students, and external link organizations. It studied the experiences of all partners involved in different collaborative projects to identify how benefits can be maximized and challenges overcome. Focal collaborations included: (1) development of real-world modules with novel assessment whereby the organization became the 'client' for student consultancy work; (2) frameworks where students collected/analyzed data for link organizations in research methods modules; (3) placement-based internships and dissertations; (4) immersive fieldwork projects in novel locations; and (5) students working as partners on staff-led research with link organizations. Focus groups, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were used to identify opportunities and barriers, while quantitative analysis of students' grades was used to determine academic effectiveness. Common challenges identified by academics were finding suitable link organizations and devising projects that simultaneously provided education opportunities and tangible benefits. There was no 'one size fits all' formula for success, but careful planning and ensuring clarity of roles/responsibilities were vital. Students were very positive about collaboration projects. They identified benefits to confidence, time-keeping and communication, as well as conveying their enthusiasm when their work was of benefit to the wider community. They frequently highlighted employability opportunities that collaborative projects opened up and analysis of grades demonstrated the potential for such projects to increase attainment. Organizations generally recognized the value of project outputs, but often required considerable assistance to put the right scaffolding in place to ensure projects worked. Benefits were maximized by ensuring projects were well-designed, innovative, and challenging. Co-publication of projects in peer-reviewed journals sometimes gave additional benefits for all involved, being especially beneficial for student curriculum vitae. PBL and student projects are by no means new pedagogic approaches: the novelty here came from creating meaningful three-way partnerships between academics, students, and link organizations at all undergraduate levels. Such collaborations can allow students to make a genuine contribution to knowledge, answer real questions, solve actual problems, all while providing tangible benefits to organizations. Because projects are actually needed, students tend to engage with learning at a deep level. This enhances student experience, increases attainment, encourages development of subject-specific and transferable skills, and promotes networking opportunities. Such projects frequently rely upon students and staff working collaboratively, thereby also acting to break down the traditional teacher/learner division that is typically unhelpful in developing students as advanced learners.

**Keywords :** higher education, employability, link organizations, innovative teaching and learning methods, interactions between enterprise and education, student experience

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