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Global perspectives, local Impact: Facilitating responsible management learning outcomes through international experiential learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores an international workshop where postgraduate students in international management and global business collaborated with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to address real-world business challenges. The workshop, designed as an experiential and immersive educational experience, aimed to enhance students' practical skills, cultural competence, and understanding of global business dynamics and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The activities in the workshop modelled Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle as students were required to work on real-world projects and challenges, tackling issues ranging from strategic planning to marketing and operational efficiency. Using a post-module questionnaire to assess the outcomes of the workshop, students self-reported improvements in their problem-solving abilities, teamwork, and intercultural communication skills, as well as a greater understanding of how the theory can be applied in the real-world. Additionally, the collaboration with NGOs provided valuable insights into the social and economic impacts of business decisions in different cultural contexts. This study highlights the benefits of experiential learning in bridging academic theory and practice and underscores the importance of international exposure in developing the skillsets of future business leaders, equipping them to navigate complex global challenges and contribute to the SDGs.

1. Introduction

As the global business environment evolves, organisations increasingly seek graduates who can contribute in sustainable, innovative, and internationally relevant ways. The [World Economic Forum's Future of Jobs Report \(2025\)](#) highlights that employers anticipate a growing importance of technology skills, such as AI and big data, as well as environmental stewardship over the next five years. As globalisation reflects the realities of an international market, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must evolve to meet the challenges posed by globalisation and facilitate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) ([Franco et al., 2019](#)). Research proposes that curricula need to prepare students to address global issues ([Kamala & Kamalakar, 2021](#)) in line with the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) ([Haertle et al., 2017](#)). As influential institutions shaping future leaders,

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HEIs play a significant role in equipping students to critically assess complex global challenges – including those related to sustainability – and to engage meaningfully with frameworks such as the SDGs (Costin et al., 2024). To support this aim, we argue that business education should incorporate real-world exposure to social and environmental challenges, encouraging critical reflection on the SDGs and related global frameworks. This interaction between multiple and international stakeholders enables students to become agile, flexible and competent in meeting the diverse and ever-changing needs of sustainable organisations. In addition, HEIs must adopt a more proactive, outward and future focused approach to teaching and learning, where learning should not only be conceived as a way of *knowing about the world*, but in some way *engaging in that world* where critical thinking and reflection provide the necessary conditions for knowledge and skills attainment (Gheradi, 1999; Brown & Duguid, 2001; Chiva & Alegre, 2005; Costin et al., 2013). Essentially, there needs to be a transition or shift away from “transmission” learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) and traditional models of education to reflect the changing global landscape, driven by market demands and technological advancements (Cai, 2017).

The intensification of globalisation raises legitimate concerns about the environmental impact of international experiential learning, notably its carbon footprint. Critics argue that reductions in student mobility on ecological grounds may constitute green-washing, where institutions claim sustainability while avoiding the costs of genuinely sustainable practices (Fischer et al. 2015; Khazem, 2018; Wals & Benavot, 2017).

Contrary to these concerns, the pedagogical benefits of experiential learning significantly outweigh potential environmental drawbacks. This learning mode offers unparalleled real-world exposure, developing critical competencies such as cultural awareness and adaptability, which are crucial for addressing global challenges (Ilyas et al. 2020). Engaging postgraduate students in diverse environments deepens their understanding of global sustainability issues, equipping them to contribute effectively to international contexts (Ezezika & Gong, 2020; Morris, 2019).

In response to environmental concerns, institutions can implement sustainable practices without compromising educational value in the following ways:

- **Use eco-friendly travel options:** Select lower-impact transportation, such as trains over planes, where feasible (Doran & Larsen, 2015).
- **Carefully consider locations:** Choose experiential learning sites that minimise travel or are accessible via sustainable transport methods (LaCroix, 2024).
- **Integrate some virtual learning:** Combine in-person and virtual experiences to reduce travel frequency and impact (Tembrevilla et al. 2023).

These strategies align with educational goals and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), showing that experiential learning can be beneficial and sustainable. This study addresses the gap in the literature on balancing educational benefits with sustainability, offering insights into designing experiential learning that meets evolving industry demands while maintaining environmental integrity (Valdivia et al. 2023; Wiek et al. 2011).

A teaching and learning approach that equips both graduates, and in turn their organisations, with high-levels skills, knowledge, and transferable skills (Hill et al., 2023; Nawagi & Raman, 2023) along with the appropriate qualities to scale and transform sustainable enterprises in a global context, is advocated allowing for more practical, experience-based learning models. While traditional classroom learning provides a theoretical foundation, it often falls short of equipping students with the practical skills and contextual understanding necessary to thrive in an interconnected global environment. As globalisation accelerates, the imperative for HEIs to

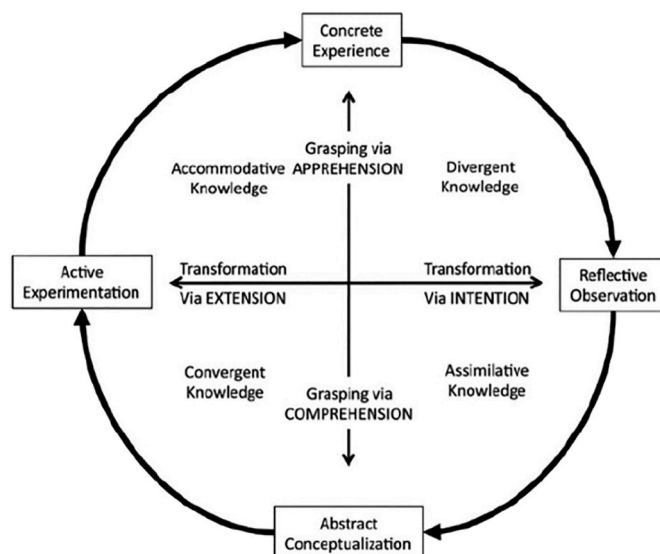


Fig. 1. Experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984).

embrace experiential learning has become increasingly clear. Experiential learning, which focuses on engaging students with real-world challenges, offers a more effective model for developing the competencies required in the modern workforce. Experiential learning is a useful means of creating the correct conditions for knowledge and skills attainment while engaging students in “real business” contexts, enabling students to leverage both experience (know how) and new knowledge (know what) and cementing the relationship between theory and practice. This paper explores experiential learning as a means of instilling the required future and transferable skills and competencies in students, by providing them with opportunities to gain practical hands-on experience on the realities of the challenges faced by organisations, in particular the challenges faced by NGO’s. This paper examines an international experiential learning experience of postgraduate students with a view to exploring their perception of experiential learning, its influence on their understanding of social and cultural dimensions of business issues, and the skills and competencies developed through this experience. The paper is structured as follows: section two reviews the theoretical underpinnings of experiential learning, followed by the research methodology (section 3). Section 4 discusses the key findings from the study and is followed by the conclusions (Section 5), which summarises the main findings, the contribution to literature, and practical implications for academics. Section 6 ends with a discussion of the study limitations and recommendations for future research.

2. Experiential learning for skills development

As a transformative educational approach, experiential learning empowers students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-life scenarios, bridging the gap between passive and active learning. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Theory (1984) provides the theoretical foundation for this approach, proposing a cyclical learning process that includes concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (see Fig. 1).

Each stage of this cycle is critical in enabling students to internalise and apply knowledge effectively. Studies support the efficacy of experiential learning in enhancing student engagement, retention, and skill development (Kolb & Kolb, 2005) arguing that this approach promotes deeper understanding and retention of knowledge and is particularly effective in bridging the gap between theory and practice (Ickes & McMullen, 2016). Experiential learning also involves active participation in hands-on experiences, fostering deeper learning and facilitating the acquisition of critical skills, which are deemed essential for the workforce. Through experiential and application of “real world learning”, students can develop a range of skills and competencies including problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork and collaboration, ethical leadership, and cultural adaptability, which prepares them for real world challenges.

2.1. Critical thinking and problem solving

Experiential learning offers students opportunities to apply theory to practice through real-world application and hands-on practical experience and has been shown to improve students’ employability by equipping them with critical thinking skills valued by employers (Bischoff et al., 2024; Zelechowski et al., 2017). Critical thinking has emerged as an essential skill for students, enabling them to analyse information, solve problems, and make evidence-based decisions. Indeed, Xerri (2024) argued that, because the absence of critical thinking skills, particularly in the business sector, can have detrimental consequences, educational programmes must prioritise this competency to avoid failures. In addition, research has demonstrated the importance of fostering critical thinking through experiential learning pedagogical approaches (Bell & Loon, 2015; Kiersch et al., 2023)—project-based learning can be very useful in promoting critical thinking and analytical capabilities. Furthermore, integrating critical thinking into the curriculum can stimulate creativity, which is a vital ingredient for innovation and maintaining a competitive edge in the global business environment (Eggers et al., 2017). Rameli et al. (2018) supported the development of critical thinking skills beyond cognitive benefits, highlighting that students participating in experiential learning activities also cultivated stronger professional ethical behaviour, and sharpened their capacity to analyse information from multiple perspectives.

Engaging students in real-world problem-solving projects enables them to apply critical thinking skills in various contexts, applying theoretical knowledge in practical settings, developing professional networks, and gaining insights into workplace dynamics (Noor et al., 2020). Researchers found that students who participated in real-world projects engaged in guided research and analysis, informing their business assumptions and enhancing their critical thinking skills (Burke-Smalley, 2014). Such hands-on experiences prepare students to tackle complex issues in their future careers. Murphy et al. (2017) reported that students participating in hands-on experiences reported significant gains in knowledge acquisition and tolerance for ambiguity, which are critical skills for students navigating dynamic business environments. Yardley et al. (2012) found that experiential learning significantly enhances students’ problem-solving skills, noting that students who engaged in experiential learning demonstrate superior problem-solving abilities compared to those who relied solely on traditional learning methods. The authors argued that the effectiveness of experiential learning is directly related to a sound understanding of the underlying theory and its application in real-world contexts.

Reflection is a critical component of Kolb’s experiential learning cycle, bridging experience and learning. Reflection enables students to process their experiences, analyse their actions, and derive meaningful insights. Nistor and Samarasinghe (2019) emphasise that reflective practice during experiential learning fosters an authentic learner-centred environment, enhancing students’ ability to connect theory with practice, assisting them in deepening their understanding, and identifying knowledge gaps for continuous improvement, allowing students to take ownership of their learning journey. There is also a need to incorporate feedback into the experiential learning experience to encourage students to reflect on their decision-making and thought processes. Samañonok et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of feedback in enhancing students’ performance, which can also be applied to critical thinking development. By reflecting on their choices and the reasoning behind them, students can identify areas for improvement and refine their critical thinking skills. Experiential learning also plays a significant role in developing effective teamwork skills (Thakur et al.,

2024), thereby fostering a sense of belonging and connection which is motivating for students.

2.2. Cultural competence, responsibility, and ethical leadership

Graduates need to develop cultural competence as well as an understanding of business ethics, sustainability, and corporate social responsibility, to ensure they can navigate the complexities of the modern, global business environment (Burga et al., 2017; Brundiars et al., 2021; Laasch et al., 2022). Through real-world interactions, experiential learning programmes can prepare students to manage diverse teams and make ethical decisions in international settings (Hossain et al. 2017; Lau et al. 2021; McGunagle & Zizka, 2020).

The incorporation of ethics into business education, especially in preparing future leaders for complex, real-world challenges is deemed imperative (Nuraini et al. 2021). Embedding business ethics into curricula is critical for nurturing a sense of social responsibility among students and preparing them to navigate ethical dilemmas in diverse and often volatile business environments. Similarly, Ironkwe and A (2015) emphasise that students need a solid grounding in ethics to make decisions that are both profitable and socially responsible, which is not only beneficial for individual students and businesses but also for broader societal impact. Experiential learning, and moreover international experiential learning, can expose students to ethical challenges related to labour practices or environmental sustainability in different cultural contexts. Such experiences foster ethical awareness and adaptability, preparing students to make informed decisions in their future careers. Research also indicates that students who engage in international experiential learning often report increased openness to cultural differences and improved intercultural communication skills (Steinbauer et al., 2019). Relatedly, pairing students with mentors who exemplify ethical leadership can significantly influence their ethical development. Mentors with high moral awareness and ethical leadership qualities can effectively model ethical behaviour and guide students through ethical dilemmas, helping students internalise ethical principles and apply them in practical situations (Mishra & Agarwal, 2018; Mthombeni, 2023).

In addition to business ethics, cultural adaptability has emerged as an indispensable skill for graduates to operate effectively in culturally diverse business environments, where they need to understand local customs, values, and market dynamics. Ly et al. (2015) argue that curricula should be tailored with input from local industry representatives to address culturally sensitive issues effectively. This curriculum adaptation ensures that students are well-prepared to engage with global markets, while also enhancing their cultural competence and responsiveness to global business dynamics. HEIs can play a vital role in promoting cultural adaptability among students through experiential learning projects that immerse students in different cultural contexts and encourage them to engage with local communities. Research indicates that such experiences significantly enhance students' cultural intelligence and adaptability, as they learn to navigate new social norms and communication styles (Alexander et al., 2021, 2022; Earnest et al., 2015). By working in international settings, students are exposed to diverse organisational cultures and practices, fostering their ability to adapt to different environments. Students are more open to cultural differences and improve their intercultural communication skills, which are essential for success in a globalised business environment (Earnest et al., 2015).

Participants in these experiential learning programmes gain insights into sustainable business practices, aligning their learning with global sustainability goals and enhancing their ability to contribute to corporate social responsibility initiatives (Eang et al. 2022; Landrum & Ohsowski, 2017; Ordonez-Ponce et al. 2021; Wu & Shen, 2016).

2.3. Summary

Having reviewed the literature on the benefits of international experiential learning for developing critical thinking and problem solving skills, cultural competence, responsibility, ethical leadership, and sustainability in business practices, this study explores the experience of postgraduate students in terms of their perception of experiential learning, its influence on their understanding of social and cultural dimensions of business issues, and the skills and competencies they developed during the experience.

Despite the growing emphasis on integrating global business realities into postgraduate education, existing literature primarily focuses on undergraduate settings or remains geographically constrained, largely overlooking the unique challenges and opportunities presented by international experiential learning for postgraduate students (Tobbell & O'Donnell, 2013; Lamb, 2015). This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the direct impacts of international experiential learning on postgraduate students' development of critical business skills and their application in a global context (Ezezika & Gong, 2020; Ilyas et al. 2020). By examining these aspects, the research contributes new insights into effective pedagogical strategies that align with the complexities of the modern global workforce (Ilyas et al., 2020).

The primary research question guiding this study is:

How does participation in international experiential learning programmes influence the development of practical business skills and cultural competencies among postgraduate students?

Additionally, this research investigates how these programmes can be structured to maximise their effectiveness in preparing students for the global business environment (Moore et al. 2010).

3. Research methodology

This section explains the format of the module, the participating NGOs, the problems and challenges set by the NGOs, the ethical and recruitment considerations, the instrument that was employed to gather students' feedback, and the data collection and analysis processes.

3.1. The international workshop module

The International Workshop serves as a capstone module for students enrolled in the MSc in [redacted] at the University of [redacted]. Participation is mandatory and assessed on a pass/fail basis (3 ECTS credits). By this stage in their studies, students have developed a strong foundation in key areas such as international market dynamics, global business strategy, organisational structure in a cross-border context, and responsible management. This module is therefore designed to integrate and apply their knowledge in a practical, real-world setting, reinforcing their ability to navigate international business challenges.

The core objective of the workshop is to provide students with direct exposure to the benefits and challenges of operating in international work environments and markets. It highlights the critical role that cultural, economic, and regulatory variations play in shaping organisational functions and decision-making as well as on how NGOs pursue the SDGs. Through this experience, students gain a greater understanding of international business strategy and the adaptability needed for responsible management in global roles.

Specifically, the workshop aims to engage students with NGOs to address real-life business problems, providing them with practical experience and insight into managing a global business. This is achieved through interactions with both academics and NGO managers in an international context (Berlin, Germany), which serves to deepen students' social engagement and understanding of NGO missions and business strategies.

The international workshop provides a robust framework for students to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world business challenges, reflect on their experiences, abstract lessons from expert talks, and experiment with solutions, in line with Kolb's experiential cycle, as outlined below. Through this structured approach, students achieve key learning outcomes in problem-solving, leadership, intercultural competence, and digital marketing innovation, preparing them for responsible management and leadership roles in global business contexts.

- **Concrete Experience:** Students are asked to tackle real-world business problems and challenges (details of these problems are provided in Section 3.1).
- **Reflective Observation:** Daily discussions require students to critically reflect on their experiences, before applying theoretical knowledge to practical situations.
- **Abstract Conceptualisation:** Expert talks and case studies help students to understand broader business theories and frameworks, including the importance of the SDGs.
- **Active Experimentation:** Students test and refine their digital marketing strategies, incorporating feedback from NGOs and peers, which fosters deeper learning and skill development.

In terms of learning outcomes, students are required to:

- prepare and present an analysis of a specific business problem identified by the NGO, along with actionable recommendations. Students are asked to make reference to relevant SDGs to highlight how addressing this problem could contribute to global sustainable efforts; and
- gain an understanding of the similarities and differences in managing businesses across different cultures.

Before going to the workshop in Berlin, students attend workshop preparation seminars organised by participating faculty, at their home institution. Each participating NGO sends on details of their respective business problems or challenges well in advance of the international workshop to enable groups to have more time to prepare and formulate possible approaches to those problems or challenges (details are provided in the next section). As part of their final preparations for the trip, groups are required to submit pre-workshop reports following initial virtual consultations with their respective NGOs, which summarise their assigned NGO's goals, organisation structure, target market, any competitors (if relevant), value proposition, and goals for performance. Students are accompanied on the international workshop by two willing members of academic staff who oversee progress on the remaining groupwork, which takes place at the workshop destination in Berlin, Germany. Upon return, groups then finalise and submit their respective post-workshop reflective reports to the module leader, which summarises what they learned from the project from both an academic and ethical perspective, and what they learned from one other class event/activity undertaken during the module (students can choose which one).

3.2. The participating NGOs

NGO 1 is an AI company that uses computer vision and deep learning models to help greenhouses produce food more efficiently and at lower cost. They do this in five countries across Europe with the goal being to democratise access to healthy and high-quality food around the world.

3.2.1. Project description & objectives

The organisation has been seeing increasingly more traction in their domestic markets (The Netherlands and Germany) and has started to get some attention in the UK market. They are currently active in five markets and understand what messaging and marketing strategy to use in order to effectively reach their customers.

However, for the UK market, they are not yet aware of what marketing strategy works best and what messaging would work best for

UK growers. The challenge is to make a practical, scalable, and targeted marketing strategy for our ICP (ideal customer profile) in the UK market.

3.2.2. Deliverables

- An SEO analysis of what messaging and tone the growers in the UK resonate well with;
- A list of which fairs are interesting to attend to reach the most amount of growers in the shortest amount of time, and which marketing materials should be used at those fairs;
- An outline of which growers should be targeted for the UK outreach and the best ways to get in contact with them; and
- A general marketing template that is scalable and can later be adapted for other markets.

This problem/challenge contributes to sustainable development goals 2, 3, 9, 11, and 12.

NGO 2 is a boutique consultancy for data protection and privacy focussing in particular on GDPR compliance for technology companies around the world. With a growing team of 12, they are helping technology organisations with their privacy and compliance challenges with programs, custom approaches, and provision of retainer and data protection officer support.

3.2.3. Project description & objectives

The organisation plans to launch a new product and needs help developing a marketing and communications strategy. This product aligns with their current offerings, helping clients understand data protection and privacy laws.

Currently focused on GDPR, they aim to expand to the new EU AI Act. Their clients range from start-ups to SMEs globally. They want to use this strategy to reach new clients who see AI as strategic, thereby leveraging their brand recognition.

The project should include an analysis of target audiences, commercial strategy (e.g., standalone product, lead magnet, integration with current services), pricing strategy, marketing strategy, and a communications plan.

3.2.4. Deliverables

- Engagement with the company's core team to build a full understanding of the new product offering and possible audiences;
- A report outlining and analysing the market opportunities, identifying the optimal target audience, and outlining the proposed marketing and communications plan; and
- A presentation of the marketing and communications strategy to the core team, including a go-to-market plan with clearly defined steps and key milestones.

This problem/challenge contributes to sustainable development goals 8 and 9.

NGO 3 designs, develops, deploys and—together with their partners—operates turnkey solar solutions and business models for off-grid frontier markets worldwide. Since 2011, the organisation has deployed over 250 solar powered kiosks (EHUBBs) in frontier markets.

3.2.5. Project description & objectives

The organisation is launching a new solar rooftop enterprise focused on direct consumer engagement. Their main goal is to streamline operations and enhance customer satisfaction. They are developing a website as their digital storefront and expect a high volume of inquiries requiring efficient management.

Implementing a well-configured Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system, with document management accessible via a login page, will revolutionise their sales processes, ensuring quality control and operational efficiency, and boosting customer satisfaction and loyalty.

3.2.6. Deliverables

- Sales process review, streamlining, and documentation strategies;
- CRM system (preselected) implementation and customisation suggestions; and
- Document management system integration suggestions for improvement (a system for securely storing and managing customer-specific documents such as proposals, contracts, installation plans, etc.)

This problem/challenge contributes to sustainable development goals 7 and 11.

NGO 4 creates sustainable 'Cosspaces' for professionals to live, work and come together under one roof. They provide a range of high-quality furnished flats, flexible offices and community spaces that offer unrivalled comfort, eco-conscious design and an inspiring community. Overall, their mission is to create 'Cosspaces' that have a positive impact.

3.2.7. Project description & objectives

The project involves creating a marketing strategy for their building in Aachen Preuswald (ACPW). Opened in 2023, the building is 20 min from the city centre in a calm, nature-rich area. Despite its beauty and good connectivity, the distance to the city centre has led to fewer tenants.

3.2.8. Deliverables

- A marketing plan comprising recommended strategies and tactics;
- Ideas to increase community engagement like workshops, or activities that would increase awareness; and
- A roadmap or timeline for implementing the recommended marketing strategies and tactics.

This problem/challenge contributes to sustainable development goal 11.

3.3. Ethics and recruitment

The two faculty members who lead the module (both of whom are also co-authors of this paper) accompanied the 17 students to Berlin, Germany over five days in May 2024 and facilitated several drop-in clinics at a Berlin hotel during that time. The students were assigned to groups (three groups of four and one group of five), depending on which project they had chosen.

During that time, groups could seek expertise and guidance from the faculty members if they encountered problems meeting NGO client requirements. After the final presentations were made to the NGO managers, students were invited to complete an anonymous survey aimed at capturing their thoughts and impressions around both the learnings from the trip and the module itself. The survey was developed in Microsoft Forms and was emailed to the students a few days after returning from Berlin. Students were given one week to complete the survey.

To ensure students did not feel coerced into completing the survey, students were assured that completing the questionnaire was optional and was not connected in any way to the grade for their module. Students were not required to supply their names or email addresses when completing the survey, so it remained anonymous. All students who participated in the workshop automatically received a pass grade for the module, regardless of whether they completed the survey or not. Students were made aware of this pass/fail structure before they went on the workshop, which may have reduced academic pressure and allowed them to engage more freely and authentically with the workshop content and the end-of-workshop survey. Of the 17 students who attended the workshop, 15 students chose to complete the survey (an 88 % response rate).

3.4. The research instrument

The purpose of the survey was twofold: 1) to inform the ongoing development of the workshop for future cohorts and 2) to inform the instructors' research, two of whom are authors of this study. A questionnaire was deemed appropriate as it systematically captured students' self-reported skill improvements while ensuring anonymity for honest feedback. The survey was custom designed by the authors to align with Kolb's experiential learning stages and the learning outcomes of the workshop. It incorporated constructs frequently used in experiential learning evaluations, such as reflection, application of theory, intercultural awareness, and personal development. The mix of question types enabled triangulation between descriptive responses and Likert-style ratings. The survey comprised 23 questions in the form of multiple choice, Likert scale, open-ended, and descriptive questions whereby students were encouraged to write freely and describe their experiences. This approach afforded the students space and time to reflect and freely construct their individual experiences of the international workshop.

3.5. Data collection and analysis

Data from the open-ended and descriptive questions were analysed by two of the authors of this manuscript. These authors also accompanied the students at the workshop. Responses were read multiple times by both authors, with rotating responsibilities to ensure independent interpretation, looking for evidence of experiential learning regarding how the international workshop developed students' responsible management skills and competencies (Kolb, 1984). Initially, responses were analysed using holistic-content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998) to unearth patterns in the data. Initial impressions were noted, and the emergent themes were then used to provide categories, thus employing categorial-content approach (Lieblich et al., 1998). This approach was deemed appropriate because the experience of the international workshop was shared amongst the students and the categorial approaches to data analysis allowed for identification of themes across the survey. Three main themes emerged from the analysis and are presented in Section 4.

4. Discussion of the findings

This section presents an overview of the background demographics of respondents followed by an overview of their overall experiences and evidence of experiential learning.

4.1. Background demographics

In terms of age range, ten of the fifteen respondents (67 %) were in the 18–24 age bracket, with the remaining five being in the 25–34 age bracket. In terms of gender, 8 (53 %) reported as being male, with 7 reporting as female (47 %).

Eight respondents (53 %) had no prior experience with in-person workshops or events, four had limited experience (1–2 workshops), two had moderate (3–5 events), and one had extensive experience (more than five events).

4.2. Overall experiences

The findings depict a very positive international experiential learning experience among the student cohort. Overall, the 15 students who responded to the questionnaire were satisfied with the international experiential learning experience, with 12 students (80 %) indicating that they were “very satisfied” and 3 (20 %) indicating they were “satisfied”.

When asked which activities they found the most beneficial, students were particularly positive about the following five components:

- Guided tours of NGOs
- Hands-on business challenges
- Cultural immersion activities
- Networking with local professionals
- Group discussions and collaborations

All respondents reported that the *cultural immersion activities* and *networking with local professionals* were either ‘extremely beneficial’ or ‘very beneficial’. Six students (40 %) reported that the guided tours were only ‘moderately beneficial’, and one student reported that it was only ‘slightly beneficial’, but all other respondents (n = 8, 53 %) reported that they were either ‘extremely beneficial’ (13 %) or ‘very beneficial’ (40 %).

Additionally, 11 students (73 %) indicated that they were more focused and engaged in this learning experience compared to traditional learning and classroom modes, commenting on the benefits of applying theory to practice. Additionally, some students commented that the learning experience was very beneficial in terms of developing cognitive and non-cognitive competencies, as outlined in the qualitative student feedback presented in Section 4.3. The integration of real-world business challenges and in-person interactions with NGOs and professionals enhanced their problem-solving abilities, teamwork, leadership development, cultural awareness and adaptability, along with their awareness of the SDGs and their role in guiding the work of the NGOs.

4.3. Evidence of experiential learning

This section presents a thematic analysis of students’ learning as they progressed through the four stages of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984).

4.3.1. Addressing and solving real-world business challenges (concrete experiences)

As discussed in the methodology section, students were asked to address and solve business challenges posed by various NGOs and organisations facing a range of operational challenges that required innovative and strategic solutions. These activities can be described as the concrete experience in Kolb’s framework (Kolb, 1984). The findings suggest that students really benefited from the hands-on experience, as evidenced in the following quotes:

“We were able to understand how the various player plays [sic] a role in running an NGO and how various factors such as PESTEL [Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Environmental, and Legal factors in the external environment] affects it.”

“Interacting with NGO’s and professionals has significantly enhanced my learning experience. These interactions have enhanced my understanding of theoretical knowledge, broadened my vision, and improved my judgment, thinking and problem-solving skills.”

“... .. significantly enhanced my learning experience by providing practical insights and real-world perspectives that are often missing from theoretical studies. Direct engagement allowed me to ask specific questions, gain immediate feedback, and understand the nuanced challenges and successes in the field.”

4.3.2. Reflecting on learning (reflective observation)

Reflection emerged as a key distinguishable feature of the international learning experience. Throughout the process, students engaged in guided reflective discussions on their expert interactions and real-world immersive experiences, which aligns with Kolb’s reflective observation phase (Kolb, 1984). The perceived shift in the instructor’s role from lecturer to facilitator/mentor was seen as effective, as evidenced in the following quotes:

“We were allowed to have more freedom but could go to the supervisors for more advice and their perspective acting as a facilitator rather than telling us what we need to do to essentially pass.”

“This approach fosters a more interactive and engaging learning environment that encourages active participation and collaboration among students.”

Students felt this approach promoted active learning, allowing them to take ownership and responsibility of their problem-solving processes while receiving structured guidance and feedback. These feedback sessions, facilitated by tutors, allowed students to critically reflect on their experiences with the business challenges, exploring the effectiveness of their strategies, decisions, and leadership styles, and asking key questions such as: “Have we considered the SDGs?”; “What worked well today? What challenges did we face?”

How could we improve our approach?“. The reflective discussions were essential for helping students critically assess how their theoretical knowledge was being applied in practice, and to identify gaps in their understanding, make connections between theory and practice, and learn from both successes and failures. The module structure, including pre-briefings and final presentations, required students to link their solutions to the SDGs, reinforcing their applied relevance. Several responses indicated an increased awareness of the broader social, environmental, and ethical challenges tackled by NGOs, some of which directly aligned with the SDG themes as reflected in the following quotations:

“Before this, I didn’t really think about how energy and sustainability were connected to business, but our NGO’s work really showed how important SDG 7 is in making clean energy more accessible.”

“Our project linked really well with SDG 11 on sustainable cities as we had to think about community impact and how to make our recommendations work for local people, not just the organisation.”

“It was interesting seeing how the NGO’s challenge tied into SDG 9. We weren’t just thinking about marketing; we were also trying to support innovation and sustainable development.”

4.3.3. *Benefitting from expert guidance and case studies (abstract conceptualisation)*

In order to address the problems and challenges they were assigned during the workshop, students were exposed to expert-led teaching sessions and case studies, which helped them bridge the gap between practical experiences and theoretical concepts (abstract conceptualisation in Kolb’s framework). These sessions and case studies also provided students with cognitive knowledge in the application of broader business frameworks and models to better understand practical challenges. The following student quotes demonstrate the value of these activities:

“Just having a hands-on experience on how firms work and how their projects should be handled and how corporate world is in practice, helped a lot to understand things and apply theoretical knowledge.”

“It is always a proper test to apply knowledge I have learned in a real-life situation and if able to do so means you truly understand the concepts we have learned. This trip allowed me to do just that.”

“The practical experience in Berlin helped me apply my theoretical knowledge by immersing me in real-world situations, allowing me to observe and participate in professional practices. This hands-on experience solidified my understanding and highlighted the relevance of my studies, bridging the gap between theory and practice. As a result, I can now apply marketing theory learned in class.”

4.3.4. *Implementing and testing solutions (active experimentation)*

During the workshop, students also gained knowledge in areas of digital innovation and marketing and were presented with the opportunity to initially conceptualise, and later implement, digital marketing solutions for various organisations, thereby showing their progress from abstract conceptualisation to active experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

As the organisations were NGO’s, students developed an understanding of the unique challenges these organisations face and how they strive to balance sustainability with growth, while maintaining the highest standards of ethical business practices. The following student quote reinforces the benefits of interacting directly with professionals:

“Engaging directly with professionals has provided valuable insights into industry challenges, practices and ethical standards that will be critical to my future career.”

During the workshop, students were encouraged to adopt various perspectives and approaches to test the viability of their solutions in response to feedback from the NGOs and organisations they were working with. This feedback prompted students to reflect on their decision-making and strategy implementation and to refine solutions and strategies based on real-time engagement and results. Feedback also drew their attention to cultural sensitivity and local market conditions, thereby helping them to improve their approach after each feedback iteration. As a result, students improved their intercultural competence and communication skills, which will be essential when working in global teams and organisations. The intercultural aspects were highlighted in the following two student extracts:

“Adapting to a new cultural environment and overcoming language was very beneficial.”

“Having this internal field trip not only helped me in a practical way, it may also gave [sic] me a boost of confidence to consider getting a job in an international market it’s not as daunting as it seems.”

By proactively experimenting and adapting their solutions in the “real-world” context, students demonstrated their ability to be agile, flexible, and innovative. Students effectively applied what they had learned and fine-tuned their solutions through continuous learning and practice. This cycle of active experimentation ensured that students developed dynamic problem-solving skills and will be capable of adapting to the complexities of real-world business environments.

Peer-to-peer learning was also promoted during the workshop, which encouraged students to share insights, perspectives and approaches in a co-creation learning environment (Fisher, 2021). This environment helped students gain new perspectives on how similar challenges could be approached differently. Peer to peer learning also enabled students to develop leadership qualities when

they had to support team members, lead communications, and guide team efforts. Students highlighted the benefits of the collaborative elements for problem-solving and developing innovative solutions, as evidenced in the following quotes:

“I was the only touchpoint between our team and the company. I carried out all communications and scheduled all our meetings as well as ensuring everyone contributed equally.”

“I motivated our team to meet the demands of the project under the time limit. I was there to offer guidance if people were unsure of what was required of them.”

“I displayed leadership qualities throughout the module by actively coordinating group activities, facilitating discussions, and ensuring effective communication among team members. I also took initiative in problem-solving, guided collaborative efforts towards achieving goals, and supported peers in their learning, demonstrating responsibility and influence.”

Several students also demonstrated an increased awareness of sustainability trade-offs inherent in international business travel, particularly in terms of balancing the pedagogical benefits of real-world immersion with the environmental costs of mobility.

“It was a really great experience overall, but I did wonder about the environmental side of things like whether the travel was really necessary or if parts of it could be done differently.”

“I hadn’t really thought much about the impact of trips like this before, but it did make me more aware that even study-related travel has an environmental cost.”

This echoes the sustainability concerns raised in the introduction and reinforces the value of exposing students to these real-world tensions. By actively engaging with NGOs whose missions include sustainability goals, students were challenged to critically reflect on how educational, ethical, and environmental goals intersect. Incidentally, some even noted that working in a non-native language environment and engaging with locally rooted organisations in Berlin helped them develop greater confidence and adaptability in cross-cultural settings; challenges that would not have emerged in a domestic context.

“It was a bit challenging at first trying to work in a place where English wasn’t the main language, but it actually helped me feel more confident dealing with different people.”

“Talking to the local team in Berlin made me realise you have to be more aware of how you come across ... I don’t think I’d have picked that up as much if we’d done something similar at home.”

5. Conclusions

This paper describes an international experiential learning workshop, which challenges students to solve real-world problems, reflect on their learning, learn new theories by interacting with experts and reviewing case studies, and experiment and test various solutions. Each of these activities are aligned with Kolb’s experiential learning model, which brings learners from the initial concrete experience, to reflective observation, to abstract conceptualisation, and finally to active experimentation, before presenting them with the next concrete experience loop. The varied and engaging nature of the workshop activities enabled students to develop their knowledge, expertise, critical-thinking and problem-solving abilities, teamwork skills, and intercultural awareness, while also strengthening their awareness of the SDGs, and how they intersect with real-world business challenges, particularly in the NGO sector.

The quantitative and qualitative data from the post-module questionnaire demonstrates that students believe they achieved the key learning outcomes. Students reported improvements in their ability to apply theoretical knowledge to real-world business challenges, underscoring the effectiveness of using Kolb’s Experiential Learning Cycle when designing learning experiences. The feedback reinforces the value of experiential learning in higher education, particularly in preparing students to navigate the complexities of a globalised economy where sustainable solutions are essential.

The international experiential learning workshop enabled participants to learn about theoretical constructs from international experts, and apply the theory to real-world problems, while also enhancing their problem-solving acumen, intercultural competence, and leadership capabilities. Collaboration with NGOs, many of which operate in socio-economically diverse regions, exposed students to the intricate social and cultural dimensions underpinning modern business challenges. These partnerships afforded students the opportunity to engage with critical issues, such as sustainability, ethical decision-making, and corporate social responsibility (CSR), all of which are central to navigating the increasingly interconnected global marketplace. The international setting of Berlin was particularly valuable in exposing students to transnational regulatory environments, culturally diverse markets, and NGOs operating with globally distributed teams. These conditions challenged students to navigate intercultural communication barriers, varying ethical norms, and region-specific interpretations of sustainability. Compared to local experiential learning, this international exposure required students to consider how business solutions must be adapted across borders – a critical skill in today’s globalised business environment (McGunagle & Zizka, 2020). The international setting also prompted reflection on the environmental footprint of such mobility, encouraging students to consider how global engagement can be designed sustainably. These reflections further embedded sustainability as a lived concern, supporting the workshops’ learning objectives around global business awareness and responsible decision-making, which were applied through the lens of the Sustainability Development Goals in each challenge.

5.1. Contribution to the body of literature

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on experiential learning by demonstrating how international, real-world engagements enhance students' critical thinking, problem-solving skills, cultural adaptability, and ethical leadership—all competencies that are essential for global business environments. Drawing upon Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle, the findings reaffirm the theory's relevance in higher education, particularly in postgraduate business curricula. The study supports previous research that suggests experiential learning fosters deeper cognitive engagement (Ickes & McMullen, 2016; Kolb & Kolb, 2005), helping students bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and its practical application in complex, real-world scenarios (Burke-Smalley, 2014; Noor et al., 2020).

The findings also align with research on the pedagogical benefits of international experiential learning. Prior literature emphasises that students engaged in real-world, culturally diverse business challenges develop critical global competencies, including cultural intelligence and adaptability (Alexander et al., 2021, 2022). This study provides further evidence that international experiential learning fosters cultural competence by exposing students to diverse business environments, requiring them to navigate varying regulatory, social, and ethical landscapes (Earnest et al., 2015; McGunagle & Zizka, 2020). Students reported a significant increase in their ability to work in diverse teams and adapt to international business contexts, reinforcing findings from Laasch et al. (2022) on the importance of responsible management education.

Additionally, this research adds to the literature on sustainability education by illustrating how experiential learning can integrate sustainability concepts into business education. Past studies highlight the importance of sustainability competencies in higher education (Brundiers et al., 2021; Wiek et al., 2011), and this study affirms that direct engagement with NGOs working on sustainability initiatives enhances students' awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their relevance to business strategy. Students' feedback demonstrated a heightened understanding of the intersection between business practices and sustainability, aligning with research suggesting that experiential learning promotes ethical leadership and corporate social responsibility (Landrum & Ohsowski, 2017; Ordóñez-Ponce et al., 2021).

The findings reinforce the need for higher education institutions to integrate real-world challenges into curricula to prepare students for an increasingly complex and interconnected business landscape. By engaging students in hands-on learning experiences, institutions can enhance their ability to navigate diverse cultural, economic, and regulatory environments. This approach ensures that graduates develop practical problem-solving skills, adaptability, and a deeper understanding of global business dynamics, ultimately equipping them to respond effectively to the evolving demands of the workforce (Costin et al., 2024; Ilyas et al., 2020).

5.2. Practical implications for academics

This research contributes to the academic discourse by demonstrating the efficacy of international experiential learning programmes in enhancing key competencies required for global business environments. It extends existing theories of experiential learning by applying them within the postgraduate context and across international boundaries, thus providing new evidence of the applicability and benefits of these educational models in higher education (Akella, 2010; Culpin & Scott, 2012; Yusof et al. 2020). Furthermore, the research findings offer practical insights for other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) seeking to incorporate real-world business challenges into their curricula to foster sustainable business practices and global leadership skills among students (Bedawy, 2017; Ortiz-de-Montellano et al. 2023). On a practical level, instructors and programme designers may find value in the detailed description of the workshop format, project topics, and learning cycle stages. The workshop was funded through internal university resources allocated for programme development and student engagement. NGOs were recruited through professional networks and outreach to partner organisations, with an emphasis on mission alignment and project-based learning opportunities. These practical insights can help other institutions replicate or adapt similar initiatives, particularly when aiming to embed SDG-oriented, international, experiential learning within their curricula.

6. Limitations and recommendations for future research

This study describes a workshop organised by the business school in one Higher Education Institution, which involved 17 students. Students were asked to provide quantitative and qualitative feedback on their perceptions of the experience and skills development in a post-workshop questionnaire. Considering the limited number of participants in this study (15 students responded), all from a single institution, future research could benefit from a longitudinal approach with a larger participant pool. This would allow for an exploration of how workshop content needs to adapt to meet the evolving responsible management skills requirements in a global business environment. An additional consideration is the potential impact of the pass/fail grading structure. While this approach reduced competitive tension, it may also have influenced the degree or nature of student engagement. Future studies could explore how different assessment models affect participation, reflection depth, and learning outcomes in experiential contexts.

Future research could also explore skills levels both before and after the workshop, to more accurately measure the extent to which the learning outcomes were achieved as a direct result of the workshop. In addition, future research could incorporate additional data collection instruments, such as interviews and focus groups to probe students further on their experiences. Given that the workshop formed part of their assessment, and some of the researchers were also their instructors, students may have felt more inclined to provide positive feedback – consequently, future studies would ideally involve a gatekeeper who would serve as an independent liaison with the students. Another avenue for future research is the incorporation of pre-tests or baseline assessments, potentially using methods beyond self-reporting. Structured assessments or skills-based evaluations could provide a more objective measure of skills

development, particularly in areas such as teamwork, critical thinking, or intercultural competence. Future research could also examine which of the sustainability competencies highlighted in Wiek et al. (2011), and later by Brundiens et al. (2021), have been met by this workshop and if further refinement of the learning outcomes and content is required.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Matthew Daniels: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Michael P. O'Brien:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Yvonne Costin:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Darina M. Slattery:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology.

Glossary

NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PRME	Principles for Responsible Management Education
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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