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Learning, engaging and embedding: an approach to establishing an integrated commerce internship program

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Abstract

Despite resounding support from external stakeholders, business academics and their managers face significant challenges to establish and sustain Work Related Learning (WRL) programs in the contemporary, competitive, market-driven sector. Challenges include resourcing, finding and engaging appropriate industry placements, quality issues relating to matching student abilities with appropriate placements, supervision and assessment issues, discipline specific issues relating to professional and accrediting requirements and embedding the program in faculties and schools. This case study documents the development of one small, local commerce WRL program that sought, by its flexible, emergent approach, to foster stakeholder partnerships that support student learning and enrich academic/industry partnerships in the workplace. The paper identifies and discusses three overlapping and integrated dimensions required for developing effective WRL programs including student learning, engaging industry and embedding the program across the faculty. The paper documents the approach employed in the design, development and embedding of one learning-focused, WRL business program so that others interested in the area may benefit from this learning experience.

1. Introduction

Research over the last decade investigating the effectiveness of learning and teaching strategies in business higher education in Australia emphasises the importance of students undertaking some form of industry-engaged learning (Business Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council, 2007; Freeman, Hancock, Simpson, & Sykes, 2008). Key external stakeholders including industry and professional associations, government and accrediting bodies are unanimous in their support of this finding. The benefits for students are said to be unequivocal and include deep learning, concrete applications that link theory to practice, greater exposure to professional practice requirements and honing generic skills, all of which support the development of key graduate attributes and enhance potential

employability (ACCI, 2007; Business Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council, 2007).

Despite such resounding support from external stakeholders, academics and their managers face significant challenges to establish and sustain such programs in the contemporary, competitive, market-driven sector (Freeman, et al., 2008). Challenges include resourcing, finding and engaging appropriate industry placements, quality issues relating to matching student abilities with appropriate placements, supervision and assessment issues, discipline specific issues relating to professional and accrediting requirements and embedding the program in faculties and schools (Patrick, et al., 2009).

This paper takes up several of these challenges tracing the development of one successful, faculty internship program. The paper identifies and discusses key factors required for embedding industry-engaged learning programs to enhance the learning of second and third year commerce students. It focuses on three overlapping and integrated dimensions, student learning, engaging industry and, embedding the program across the faculty. The motivation of the paper is to document the approach employed in the design, development and embedding of one learning-focused, industry-engaged business internship program.

Work Related Learning (WRL), Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and Work Based Learning (WBL), are attracting greater recognition in Australian universities (Patrick et al, 2009). Swinburne University of Technology for example, has a University-wide department of Industry Engaged Learning. In a recent national scoping study of WIL in Australia, (the term WIL in the scoping study is a generic and inclusive term and is equivalent to our use of WRL – see Section 2.1) Patrick et al (2009) identified four strategies for enhancing WIL. These include: First, developing policies and approaches, second, a stakeholder approach, third, a WIL curriculum and pedagogy – design and alignment, assessment and methods and fourth, evaluation and quality. The findings of this scoping study are supported by the growth in number and variety of programmes, recent publications and conferences nationally and internationally (Patrick et al, 2009).

This paper documents in detail three practical areas of developing and implementing a WRL program. The paper is structured as follows: First, the changing context of undertaking WRL is presented, identifying the challenging business and academic environments. Second, the benefits and challenges of WRL and undertaking change in higher education contexts are outlined. Third, an overview is presented of the three key dimensions of the commerce internship program, including student learning, industry engagement and embedding in the faculty. Fourth, the case study is presented and the integration of the key factors discussed, followed finally, by learnings and conclusions.

2. Challenges of change for business faculties

The increasing rate and pace of change in the business world is well known and documented, see for example Thrift (2008). The extent of the challenges for business faculties in dealing with rapid change are further compounded by the slow process of institutional change in higher education. Institutions are often criticised by industry for their lack of responsiveness, however, quality curriculum and pedagogical practices necessitate stability to support consistency and clarity and reduce confusion (Freeman, et al., 2008).

While no quick fix exists to resolve such large-scale, complex challenges, WRL connects industry partners and academics in common projects with the potential to increase collaboration and reduce misunderstanding. In the process of WRL, students and their supervisors receive valuable exposure to the challenges of everyday workplace change, while

organisations benefit from students and their academic supervisor's exposure to the latest research and analysis embedded in a stable curriculum (Clements, 2009). Such integration, although small in scale, contributes to greater mutual understanding of common challenges and the need for continuous change and appropriate curriculum renewal. This case study documents the development of one small, local commerce WRL program that sought, by its flexible, emergent approach, to foster stakeholder partnerships that support student learning and enriches academic/industry partnerships in the workplace.

Although many components are considered crucial to effective programs, this study emphasises three specific areas; student learning, engaging stakeholders and embedding throughout the faculty. Based on a brief discussion of the extant literature and our experience, we consider these priority areas to be key success factors for designing and implementing a business WRL and for effectively managing the associated changes. Before discussing these three areas in detail, WRL and the broader internal and external contextual issues related to implementing change and innovation in higher education contexts are outlined.

2.1 Work Related Learning (WRL)

While no uniform definitions exist for WRL (or WIL) (Patrick et al, 2009), many different terms are used to describe learning that includes workplace experience in some form for example, Work Integrated Learning (WIL), Work Based Learning (WBL), Work Related Learning (WRL). In this paper, we employ the generic term Work Related Learning (WRL) as an all inclusive term. Such programs differ from traditional classroom projects in that students are considered insiders to the context who focus on learning from work. In other words, professional practice is privileged and drives the use of theory in the face of real-world and contextual constraints (Boud & Costley, 2007).

A number of underpinning contextual issues common to business WRL programs have been identified (Patrick et al, 2009; Clements, 2009). Such issues include local industry contexts and politics, industry seeking cheap manpower, managing employer expectations of student performance and recruiting and matching students with specific organisations. The internal context and challenges include the continuing debate relating to differences between academic and industry learning outcomes, implementing change across faculties particularly in the area of learning and teaching, the role of disciplines, how to sustain across faculties and issues related to resources and resourcing programs (Patrick et al, 2009).

2.2 Change in higher education

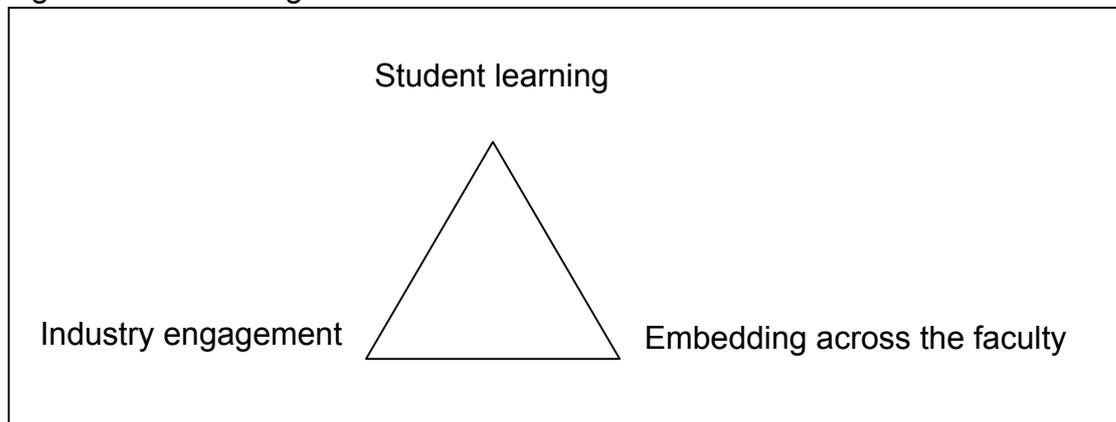
An area often overlooked in designing and implementing new programs in higher education is that of managing the accompanying change process. The higher education context has unique characteristics that require careful consideration when managing change (Elton, 2003; Lueddeke, 1999; Sykes, Freeman, Simpson, & Hancock, 2010). According to Lueddeke (1999), implementing effective change and innovation in the higher education sector is highly dependent upon contextual factors such as the importance of including the views and interests of all stakeholders, contextual awareness and collaborative engagement. Others highlight the importance of acknowledging academic autonomy, employing simultaneous bottom-up and top-down approaches and emphasising collegiality as well as respecting resistance to imposed change (Crosling, Edwards, & Schroder, 2008). Additionally, work employing the metaphor of academic tribes and territories (Becher, 1989) highlights the importance of understanding disciplinary context, not just substantive disciplinary knowledge but the associated social norms and behaviours of academics within their respective tribes.

It is important therefore for the design and implementation of WRL programmes to include considerations of the impact of accompanying change on stakeholders such as academics and other staff and their personal and organisational practices. Such practices often contain crucial knowledge embedded within complex power relations (Dawson, 2003). For example, academics are often committed to disciplinary understandings of aspects of teaching in their subjects that are not explicit in school policy (Becher, 1989). Additionally, it is only by purposely engaging with academics and staff about proposed changes that such tacit knowledge becomes explicit. In summary, if new WRL programs are to become embedded and survive, change needs to be introduced and managed carefully and sensitively.

2.3 An integrated approach

The approach adopted has three integrated elements as illustrated in Figure 1. Each of the three areas is discussed individually but in experience they overlap and are integrated.

Figure 1: Three integrated elements



2.4 Student learning

In contrast with WRL programs that are tightly structured to support matching students with particular positions, Moreland (2005) emphasises the opportunity for students to learn by adapting to changing economic situation and the evolving job market, thus equipping students to respond to wider societal developments (Moreland, 2005). Accordingly, following such an approach, emphasis is given to awareness of context and social learning that support student responsiveness and knowing in action (Boud & Garrick, 1999; Fenwick, 2002). Learning through making context-sensitive informed judgements and “know how” within “hot action” requires moving beyond the limitations of cognitive approaches to more embodied learning (Beckett & Hager, 2002). Encouraging links and connections with everyday experiences and informal learning, within and beyond the workplace contributes to the notion of life-long-learning. Such an approach acknowledges learning across the life-span (Moreland, 2005) and aims to integrate learning by assisting students to make “life-wide” connections (Jackson, 2010).

Developing reflective practices is an important dimension of learning in WRL. Reflection has long been acknowledged for its value in enabling learning from experiences in professional practice, training, education and personal development and, as such, is critical for WRL (Boud, Keogh, & Walter, 1985). Reflection has been described as the process by which we

take notice of, realise, or feel features of our actions for the improvement of our practice (Schon, 1983). Accordingly, reflective activities include diarising, blogging and debriefing, which form essential components of a congruent pedagogy.

In summary, WRL programs ought to be “flexible and responsive to the circumstances of the learner and of the work setting” (Boud, 2001:46). Much is gained by being more open to the learning derived from the whole student experience and not narrowing focus to learning competencies. Of course, this approach raises assessment design issues that require careful consideration to ensure students maximise their learning in both formal and informal settings.

2.5 Industry engagement

The notion of ‘engaging stakeholders’ has widespread currency and, therefore, an array of meanings in use (LPI, 2010). These can include encouraging relevant people to take a positive interest and to have enthusiasm for the program, and generating positive perceptions of value or importance. In this case, industry engagement is important as academic program leaders may learn from industry stakeholders about their views of success, potential risks, effective implementation and how to improve along the way. Such a view supports the view that knowledge and learning move in both directions between academe and industry and disrupt political perceptions relating to academic monopolies on knowledge (Harris, Jones, & Coutts, 2010). Additionally, stakeholder views are important for evaluation purposes (LPI, 2010). In this paper, we suggest that engaging stakeholders is an action undertaken to include and involve various partners in a particular program or project. Despite the fuzziness associated with the phrase, and the distaste of some academics, for what is perceived as another unwelcome example of the incursion of managerial language into academe, the impact of working effectively with partners in higher education programs and projects is well supported (LPI, 2010; Sykes, et al., 2010; Treleaven, Sykes, & Ormiston, In press 2012).

Difficulties associated with engaging stakeholders arise due to the need to communicate across very different worlds i.e. academe, industry and professions. Boundary spanning the worlds and differences within and between communities of practice, such as language, culture, context and practices requires effective translation skills (Yanow, 2004). For example, academics may be experts in disciplinary communities, yet unfamiliar with industry practices and jargon. Time spent communicating will not only build knowledge, but also trust, leading to open communication and the development of shared interests and values, see Harris et al (2010), for a recent example of effective partnerships and learning communities.

2.6 Embedding

Embedding can be understood as “an active process that is dynamic, emergent and unfolding” and can be contrasted with a “bolt on” or “add in” approach to development and change (Treleaven, et al., In press 2012:13). The term became very popular in higher education in the area of embedding graduate attributes in courses and programs of study (Bath, Smith, Stein, & Swann, 2004). It can however be used to describe the process in which a program, such as an internship or other industry-related program, is adopted and incorporated into existing organisational structures and practices. Further, embedded approaches to organisational change are linked to notions of sustainable change (Palmer, Dunford, & Akin, 2009). The challenge for those involved in change and innovation is *how to* embed projects and programs.

The embedding framework developed by Treleaven et al (2012, in press), provides a useful heuristic and methodology to identify and implement practices across three domains; first, leadership and communities of practice; second, curriculum, policies and procedures and;

third, resources and data bases. Beginning with engaging faculty and distributed leadership and their communities of practice ensures that leadership and disciplinary tribes have the opportunity to discuss and contribute over time. This can include internal and external communities of practice and leaders, for example, disciplinary “tribes”, industry and professional associations. Second, to ensure that support is not only verbal and conceptual, embedding in material forms of documentation, such as curriculum, policies and procedures, locks new processes into ongoing organisational practices. The importance of institutional support in this regard cannot be over-emphasised (Brown, 2010). Finally, supporting programs with high quality resources and data bases ensures that knowledge is not overlooked or duplicated. Such an approach provides an excellent framework for embedding a WRL in a school or faculty.

3. Case study: Commerce Internship Program (CIP)

The University of Wollongong, Commerce Internship Programme is a third year elective subject open to Commerce students in a range of disciplines. Since conception in 2008, the WRL program has had over 400 applicants, around 180 enrolled students and approximately 50 different host organisations. Acceptance into the program is competitive and based on an application and interview process. The program runs sessions in both autumn and spring each year and includes sixteen days of practical placement in a host organisation. The activities performed in the workplace vary, depending on the placement description provided by the host organisation. The program is also an academic subject. Students are required to complete assessment tasks that focus on their learning in the workplace through reflective activities. Assessments comprise: a daily e-log (15%), three generic modules (60%) and a final reflective journal (25%).

3.1 Design factors: establishing priorities and objectives

The initial stages in the development of the CIP prioritised discussions with three key groups of stakeholders. A pilot study identified their top five priorities for the program (Clements, 2009). Drawing on the findings of these discussions, as well as extensive informal consultation with key leaders, both within the university – Vice Chancellor, Deputy-Vice Chancellor Academic, Deans, and leaders of key industry peak bodies and professional association leaders, the program identified three clear objectives that shaped program design; First, to understand and integrate the needs and objectives of each key stakeholder; second, to enhance student learning by making a contribution to real world issues in the workplace whilst fulfilling institutional requirements for academic rigour, and; third, to embed a well supported value-adding program.

The top five industry partner priorities were:

- Creating real situations not simply projects for students in industry;
- Providing a program to view and nurture potential employees;
- Ensure student placements minimize disruption to normal work environment;
- Organizations not having to provide particular learning tasks;
- Flexible placement options.

The top five student priorities were:

- Gaining professional work experience in their chosen specialist fWRLd;
- Developing their skills at applying their knowledge to practical problems;
- Developing their ability to work effectively in a professional environment;

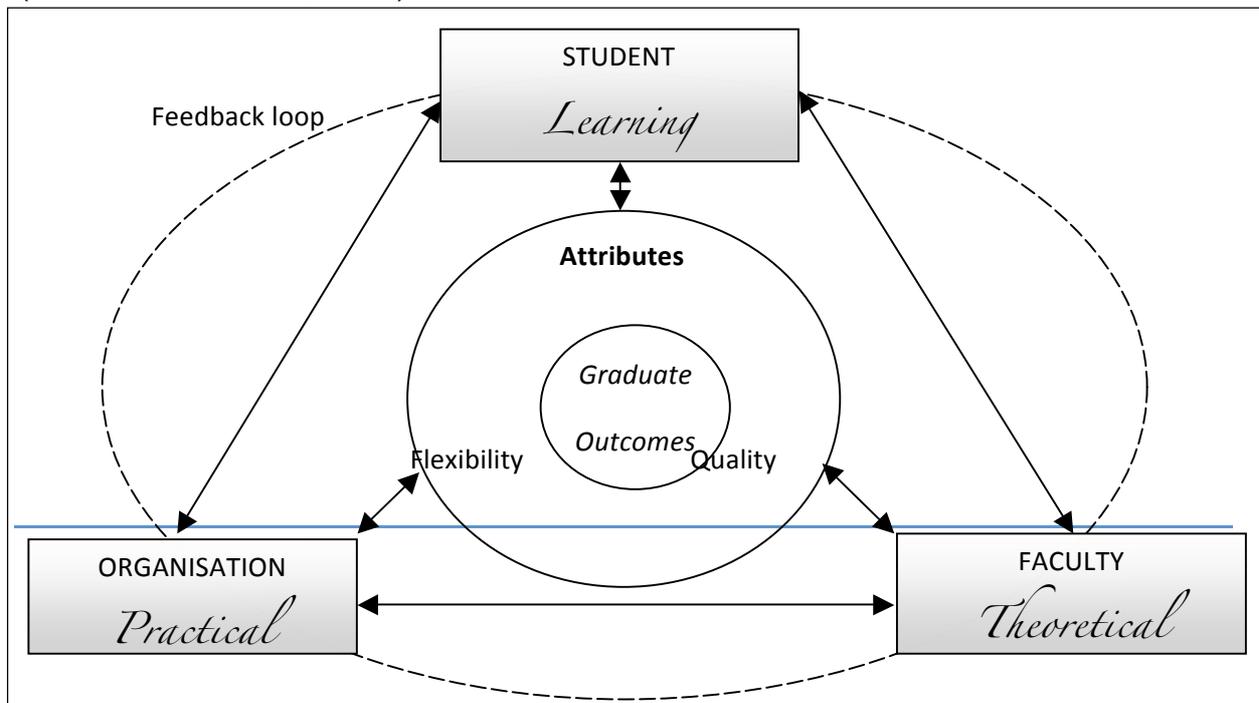
- Enhancing their employability;
- Achieving stability to focus on study and learn as you earn.

The top five academic priorities were:

- Creating a well rounded sustainable learning environment;
- Supporting the opportunity to build collaborative relationships with industry partners;
- Maintaining relevance to industry practises, benchmark programmes to industry best practise;
- Contributing to the community;
- Ensuring practice-oriented learning experience to engage students rather than sole focus on developing discipline expertise as is often the case for traditional intern placement programmes.

The identified priorities not only provided a basis for program design, but also created goodwill and momentum amongst stakeholders who became more enthusiastic and responsive when their interests were clearly represented in the program. Moreover, by fostering formal and informal communication between stakeholder groups, interdependent relationships were created where stakeholders relied on each other to contribute their particular area of expertise. By engaging industry stakeholders, business value was prioritised early in the planning and development processes. Identification of a worthwhile individualised value proposition is central to gaining the commitment of many employer representatives. Employer participation in student selection interview panels supports partnered decision-making from the outset. Additionally, by ensuring the selection process resembles as close as possible to a real job interview, students are selected on the basis of motivation, professional approach and interview abilities.

Figure 2 Commerce Internship Programme Model (Clements and Cord, 2009)



This diagram developed by Clements and Cord (2009) illustrates the importance of the

relationship and communication between the three key stakeholders, and the interrelationships between stakeholders which provides the foundation to the success and sustainability of the program.

By locating the student at the apex of the model the emphasis is placed on the student *learning experience*. In turn, the faculty supports this priority through emphasising disciplinary knowledge, funding developmental research of the program (two learning and teaching grants were obtained by program leaders to resource program research and development) and *theoretical understanding* of the discipline studied. By providing a concrete engagement with real world issues, the placement organisation contributes a *practical component* to extend and apply discipline-specific theory. Commitment to the core attributes of the programme, quality, flexibility and sustainability ensure consistency of values and practice for the three stakeholders and that graduate outcomes remain at the heart of the model. The model is dynamic and evolving, including feedback loops between stakeholders that support continuous improvement in communication, interaction and relationship development (Clements and Cord, 2009).

3.2 Approach to Student learning

The CIP is embedded in an academic subject, and, therefore, is credit bearing. CIP provides exposure to real-world business challenges and operations through students participating in organised, independent learning activities tailored for their discipline. Placement on the program is competitive, requiring successful selection by industry, leading to enacted student learning in relation to the recruitment process.

Students are provided with a supportive transition into their industry placement through an initial pre-placement meeting at the host organisation's premises with the coordinator and workplace mentor. This personalised activity ensures a professional introduction to each organisation is provided. The meeting orients the student with the organisation and discusses their role and responsibilities in further depth. At this time, formal agreements are signed by the organisation and by the student, outlining legal obligations, such as intellectual property, insurance and confidentiality. Again in this process, professional learning is enacted by students.

The assessment for the subject is conducted through e-learning modules which enable the student to maximise their own learning experience using reflective practices whilst in the workplace. By using online assessment, students are able to focus on learning in the work setting, reducing the need to travel and attend university. Additionally, the program specifically includes non-resource-intensive assessments, while maintaining a rigorous pedagogy both in its application and assessment. Organisations employ students on real work issues rather than completing a form of academic assignment in a work setting. Student feedback gained over four semesters demonstrated high levels of motivation and support for the learning approach.

3.3 Approach to Industry Engagement

Recent work on industry priorities for higher education shows that higher education must play a more active role in understanding the interests of stakeholders (Jackson 2009). The CIP program was designed in conjunction with industry representatives that identified a need for a flexible and resource-effective program that made a real business contribution. For this reason, CIP is a short, sixteen day placement, conducted during session. The placement description and the selection of the student is based on the needs of the host organisation.

One semester before the placement, host organisations submit a description of the required role, while students apply for the program through an online application system with a cover letter and resume directly to the faculty. After a short-listing process with faculty academics, the host organisation is invited to interview three students from which they make their selection. The placement can be conducted anytime during the following semester. Being relatively short in duration ensures management within the organisation have the opportunity to contribute personally to student learning and assess the possible long term value of the student to the organisation.

The structure of the program provides a low risk opportunity for industry to engage with higher education on a regular basis by allowing the organisation to continue to focus on their core business with minimal interruption from either the student or the university. The separation of work tasks and assessment minimises interruption to the host organisation and also means that the organisation does not have to dedicate resources to teaching the student, but support students in a mentoring relationship.

3.4 Approach to embedding in faculties practice

Embedding the program in the faculty initially relied upon the support of the Dean of Commerce who championed the program, both internally with senior university management, and externally, by hosting a range of business breakfasts for interested participants. Enthusiastic academics soon became dispersed disciplinary leaders and were invited to represent their discipline on a Faculty advisory team. Such an approach of first engaging leaders accords well with Treleaven et al, (2012 in press).

The program leader's membership on the faculty executive practice ensured that the program had a high profile both within and external to the faculty and that the program became embedded in the curriculum and documented within faculty and school policies and procedures. Resources developed for academic staff to promote the program in their lecture time supported academic interest and buy-in, while administrative support ensured that all external communication with industry was professionally presented.

4. Learnings and conclusions

By identifying and discussing practically the three integrated areas of focus, the paper provides insight into an approach to WRL that takes seriously both student learning and engaging partners. While WRL programs are often criticised for being labour intensive and resource heavy, the learning that comes from programs such as the CIP make them worthwhile for all stakeholder groups. The focus on contextualising and integrating student learning has encouraged students to make strong connections with their broader life experience and career plans. For the faculty, including external employer input into designing an effective and relevant learning experience for students has increased mutual understanding and willingness to collaborate. For academic staff, there is a growing understanding that placements can and should, provide an important context for learning that supports student engagement within the wider and changing content of their business studies. Moreover, the realisation that quality research opportunities are available as part of what have traditionally been regarded as vocational practices. Finally, for the industry partners, the realisation of the extent to which they can influence and shape student's learning and the knowledge brought to their organisations has inspired many to maximise the number of available placements.

One of the major constraints in implementing WRL programs is the time required for program leaders to build relationships with industry contacts. Effective program leadership

requires personal rapport and credibility amongst the business world. The ongoing challenge for both higher education and industry to commit to the learning of the next generation may mean committing resources to successful programs with little short term financial return on investment.

The authors acknowledge the limitation of the paper in that only one program was examined, as well as that the three year duration of the program is short. Additionally, that further empirical study is required to demonstrate effectiveness of student learning outcomes. Despite such limitations however, there is potential for translation of the approach to other programs and types of programs.

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