Exploring the impact of micro-internships: Insights from Students and Employers to Enhance Future Work-Based Learning Opportunities

Jamie Ogden, 2024 ASET Student Research Bursary recipient, LBS, LJMU

Dr Victoria Jackson, Principal Lecturer, LBS, LJMU

Vicki O'Brien, Senior Lecturer, LBS, LJMU

Simon Montague, Business Clinic Projects Officer, LBS, LJMU

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2. Executive Summary

This report provides the findings from the ASET Geoffrey Copland Practice Development Bursary exploring student and employer perspectives of the Micro-Internship Scheme offered by Liverpool Business School at Liverpool John Moore's University (LJMU).

In England, since 1999, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of UG students participating in yearlong placements (Little & Harvey, 2007). These placements, while valuable, extend the course duration and can present challenges for those with family commitments or caregiving responsibilities. Moreover, the competitive nature and demanding recruitment processes associated with yearlong placements also contribute to the decrease in uptake. Compounding this trend is the increasing enrolment of international students to postgraduate Management courses, which do not offer a placement option. This has led to a growing pool of students needing alternative avenues for engaging in work-based learning. Recognising these dynamics, in 2023, Liverpool Business School at LJMU took proactive measures by introducing a series of 1-day micro-internship opportunities for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. This initiative aims to integrate shorter and more accessible work-based learning experiences into the student journey, addressing the evolving needs of our diverse student body. Whilst micro-internships are not a new concept, the impact of the global health pandemic has piqued student's interest in these short-term experiences. As a result, micro-internships are starting to emerge as offering in business schools.

This research aimed to explore the efficacy of the micro-internship scheme delivered by Liverpool Business School in collaboration with local businesses, and this project gathered data from both involved students and organisations. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with both students and employers who had either attended or offered a micro-internship experience. Primary qualitative data was generated through these interviews and the data was analysed using Braun and Clarkes (2006) Thematic Analysis technique. The main findings are as follows:

- Students
    - Benefits of the micro-internship scheme included: Inclusive approach, gained practical knowledge, developed new skills, and enhanced their business understanding, a supportive environment providing real-world practical experience.
    - The above benefits helped the students to enhance their CVs and job prospects, and for international students specifically, raise their profile in the UK by strengthening ties with UK companies, thus boosting their credibility for UK career prospects.

- o The negative areas raised involved poor promotion of the micro-internships, lack of travel/subsistence costs for taking part in the day event, and a slightly longer duration of internship sought (2-days rather than 1 day).
- Employers
  - o Employers valued the micro-internship as a cost-effective way to build a talent pipeline, solve operational issues, and gain innovative ideas from students.
  - o Minimal preparation was required, and any preparation was seen a worthwhile for the payback it generated.
  - o However, resource-limited businesses struggled to fully implement new ideas created by student groups.

3. <u>Introduction to Micro-Internships</u>

Year-long placements have been the predominant Work Based Learning (WBL) mechanism in Higher Education to support students' industry experience, however many countries, including the UK (Little and Harvey, 2007) and Australia (Oke et al., 2023) have seen a year-on-year decline in year-long placement participation. Whilst this trend is happening, increasing numbers of students are graduating with employability skills (Helyer and Lee, 2014) and gaining graduate employment (HESA, 2015, 2024), suggesting other forms of WBL have inherent value. This coincides with an increase in interest for micro-internships and shorter-form WBL experiences, especially after COVID (Esrock, n.d.), warranting further research into this field.

Despite their growing popularity, defining a micro-internship is a hard task. The length of programs varies between university and employer, often ranging from 1-5 days. Pay is a contested topic, with some opportunities being paid and some that are voluntary with no pecuniary benefit. The focus of micro-internships varies, with some companies offering work generic to the sector and some offering business challenges.

For this project, Liverpool Business School (LBS) at Liverpool John Moore's University launched their Micro-internship scheme in March 2023. This micro-internship scheme offers all LBS students a unique, one-day, hands-on learning experience, hosted by local businesses and charities. These in-person opportunities, developed in partnership with LBS's Business Clinic, are designed for small groups of up to 10 students, giving them an immersive day within the company environment. The micro-internship programs each lasted for a single day, from 9am – 5pm, they were voluntary and unpaid.

During the micro-internship, students dive into real-world business challenges, working as a team to address current issues faced by the organisation. Projects might involve refining a company's social media strategy or brainstorming potential business expansion ideas. Each challenge is carefully chosen to allow students to apply their academic knowledge to practical problems, using research and theory to develop actionable solutions.

These internships are more than just learning experiences for students—they're also valuable for local employers. Businesses can benefit from fresh, creative insights and solutions to their challenges, while

students gain invaluable exposure to the inner workings of organisations, enhancing their understanding of the complexities involved in running a business.

4. A Review of the Literature in Work Based Learning

This literature review chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the work in the field of work based learning (WBL), which has become an integral part of higher education courses, particularly in the context of helping better prepare students for the future workplace. This chapter examines the existing literature in the field of work-based learning, with a specific focus on industry internships for university students. Internships within organisational settings, are a form of experiential learning, which can provide students with practical 'hands-on' experience and an opportunity to apply the theoretical knowledge learnt in education, to real-world problems and contexts. This chapter explores key theories in this field, and the multifaceted advantages that internships (or experiential learning) can offer students, including enhanced employability, skill development, and personal growth. By reviewing the current research and application of key theoretical frameworks, this chapter seeks to underscore the importance of integrating internships into university curricula and to provide insights into how such experiences contribute to students' academic and professional trajectories.

Experiential and Work Based Learning

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) offers an approach to optimise learning, which is based on learners engaging with external experiences in a practical, hands-on way. Kolb's learning cycle provides a four-step process to illustrate how individuals interpret concrete practical experiences to derive personal meaning, which then aids them in planning new actions based on their observations and reflections, to fully cement their learning from this experience. In the higher education context, experiential learning is often achieved through embedding work-based learning activities into curriculums as part of university study.

Work based learning (WBL) is an umbrella term for a range of approaches that integrate theory into the action of work through educational institutions (Patrick et al., 2008). WBL can be split into two core provisions: work-integrated learning (WIL) and work-integrated education (WIE). WIL refers to the whole experience of the individual in work and educational settings, and how reconciliation and reflection lead to actionable change (Billett, 2009). This aligns to Kolb's Experiential Learning framework, in which Reflective Observation leads to development and change whilst learners "involve themselves fully" (Kolb, 1984). At its core, novelty and the lessons learnt from it (Gergen, Kenneth. J and Czarniawska, Barbara, 1996). In contrast, WIE is comprised of the purposeful provision of experiences in work settings in line with the available curriculum to achieve specific goals (Marsh, 2009; Billett, 2010). This places greater faith in the education provider to facilitate change that can be applied to graduate contexts.

Despite the differences in foci of WIL and WIE, the use of WBL often gives equal weighting to these provisions, despite the use of WIL prevailing amongst contemporary research, and when WBL is used,

research can fail to consider how differing provision impacts outcomes and the fundamental differences between available approaches. Whilst this curriculum alignment may initially appear more beneficial to outcomes such as employability, problems with this approach arise from theoretical and practical standpoints.

Hay and Fleming (2024) suggest work-based learning opportunities are facilitated through even partnerships between Higher Education Institutions and organisations, a power dynamic which opposes the favouring of the education provider and their learning outcomes alone, whilst Nyström (2009) highlights the more dynamic nature of organisations and their ever-changing hiring desires. The effectiveness of WIE was tested by Mason et al. (2009) through students across multiple degree disciplines who completed curriculum-structured work experience (n = 3589), who consequently found there was no evidence of the work experience and the curriculum focused skills having a significant independent effect on labour market outcomes. Therefore, in order to provide clarity throughout this research, WIL will be used as a substitute for work-based learning opportunities and will forgo heavily structured WIE methodologies whilst keeping a broad scope to the other available approaches to WIL.

Another issue present within the literature is the overwhelming bias towards long-term placements in the evaluation of WIL experiences. Placements are the predominant mechanism for students gaining experience in work settings globally, facilitated by universities in their flexible course design and organisations in advertisement. Despite this, the UK has seen a noticeable year-on-year decline in year-long placement participation (Little and Harvey, 2007) with similar observable trends in Australia (Oke et al., 2023). This paints WIL as an unsustainable mechanism itself, yet more and more students are graduating with employability skills and gaining employment (Helyer and Lee, 2014), which in line with Kolb arise from a concrete experience, suggesting that other forms of WIL have some inherent value. Graduate employability is a highly volatile statistic and liable to be impacted by multiple socio-economic factors – a growing and record number of university students in the UK (Bolton, 2024) will likely support greater hiring into graduate level roles, creating a form of confirmation bias. In defence of this, graduate employability in the UK has seen an overall positive trend, rising from 73.5% of graduates in employment and employment & further study in 2013/14 to 83% in 2021/22 (HESA, 2015, 2024) running counter to the negative effects COVID had on the labour market (Lee et al., 2020). This review will make use of the wealth of publications surrounding placements as a vessel for WIL but will try and distinguish between WIL and placements in their evaluations where necessary. Irrespective of the potential relationship between the two variables, a growing employment rate of graduates places potential value in concrete experiences, of which their perceived value of such may hold even greater weight in access to WIL opportunities.

Perceived Value and Employability

'Perceived Value' originated as a marketing concept, relating to customers perceptions of value of a good or service determined by price and quality (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic and Zabkar, 2017).

Perceived value is a subjective measure with little clarity surrounding its conceptualisation – despite this, main key characteristics derived from literature have been defined; namely, the importance of individuality of stakeholders in interaction and perception, and that value is held relative to its situational and contextual nature (Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). There is an over-reliance on student perceptions and their self-report data in WIL literature (Inceoglu et al., 2019), highlighting them as the key stakeholder. Although Lawlis et al. (2024b) argues that successful WIL experiences require an equitable tripartite agreement between students, universities and organisations, Rayner and Papakonstantinou (2015) suggests that students are the main benefactors of such experiences and as such this over-reliance is partially warranted.

Jackson and Dean (2023) found that students at all levels and disciplines who has WIL and traditional placement experience perceived themselves as having greater qualification and skills preparedness (n = 55045) as well as being more employable (n = 30584). Similar studies also found that short-term WIL had a positive impact on perceptions of skills and career prospects, with 83% and 63% respectively (n = 800) directly attributing their experiences to their experiences (Potts, 2022). These experiences occurred abroad and students who pursue these may seek different outcomes to students who work domestically, however improving employment prospects was found to also be the greatest motivator for Chinese international students to pursue study and WIL (Huang and Turner, 2018), suggesting this is unlikely. This commonplace attribution of employability as a positive outcome and value of WIL suggests a link between perceived value and perceived employability – a more concrete and measurable outcome centring on their perceptions of personal employability and their likelihood of securing employment (Berntson and Marklund, 2007). Jackson and Wilton (2017) argued that positive perceptions of employability enhance confidence during job searches, an effect similar to the outcomes researched above. In spite of these perceived benefits, Jackson (2015) argues that the majority of value recognised by stakeholders develop after engagement – prior to engagement, the willingness to participate and perceived benefits are shrouded by anxiety from students. Without adequate levels of confidence to effectively engage in WIL experiences, the perceived and realised value of such experiences is negatively impacted (Coll et al., 2009; Billett, 2011). This provides a feasible explanation for the existent schism in beliefs towards WIL from academics and universities as a stakeholder. Both home and international undergraduate students who completed WIL have outperformed those who did not in final year across a range of disciplines (Gomez and Clements, 2004; Surridge, 2009; Mansfield, 2011; Reddy and Moores, 2012), and (Mandilaras, 2004) found that WIL within economics students raised their likelihood of obtaining a 2:1 by 30% (n = 124). Focus groups conducted by Crawford and Wang (2016) found that academic staff also suggested that students who undertook WIL had more developed general skills, such as time management, confidence and responsibility. Despite this, there has been pushback from academic staff in relation to WIL provision and acceptance especially in non-vocational disciplines; although this may stem from the potential increased workloads of WIL preparation (Lloyd et al., 2022), many see WIL as not the main mission of academia (Moore, 2010) and as superficial, unaware of the potential benefits (Lloyd et al., 2022). This

division between student and academic perception of perceived value highlights the individuality that remains a core principle of the concept.

The contextual nature that perceived value is created in can be interpreted through the lens of experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). Although the definition of a 'concrete experience' is still up for debate (Bergsteiner et al., 2010), clarifications by Harper (2018) and Smith and Segbers (2018) highlight the importance of a contextually rich environment, which WIL provides through a place with conceptual values (a workplace) and people in professional circumstances (workers). Graduates who worked part-time jobs during university gained less employability confidence than those who took part in WIL, as available part-time jobs did not relate to their desired fields despite building generic skills (Evans et al., 2015; Vuolo et al., 2016). The importance of contextual experience was further highlighted by (Jackson and Dean, 2023), who found business graduates with aspirations to work in the field who took part in WIL had higher levels of perceived employability compared to students in other disciplines or who wished to work elsewhere. Problems are "inherently contextual-specific" (Morris, 2020, p. 10), so being able to apply solutions developed through abstract conceptualisation to the same field is likely to raise confidence as seen in the study. Students who take professional vocation degrees are likely to be confident in their career trajectory (Hosein and Rao, 2017) so stand to benefit most from this, however, Kinash et al. (2017) argue that most students are undecided on their career trajectory and the subsequent skills and context needed before graduation and initial employment, so the number of students able to benefit from this increased confidence is likely small.

The inherent risk associated with 'active experimentation' (Roberts, 2018) can further relate the experiential learning cycle with WIL, a known high-risk activity (Cameron, 2018; Fleming and Hay, 2021). The concrete experiences gained through WIL aim to push learners to "the edge of what they are comfortable with" and produce unfamiliarity (Grimwood et al., 2018, p. 9) – this process facilitates the production and presence of anxiety (Wainwright et al., 2017), which as discussed previously discourages participation in WIL. If participants are able to move past the initial onset of anxiety, the fear of repercussions or threats to potential continued employment post-graduation within WIL opportunities may lead to the suppression of initiative and lessened potential value from the opportunity (Rowe and Zegwaard, 2017), and that a subsequent lack of proactivity from students led to an inability to identify skills gained (Eden, 2014).

Through their systematic review, Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo (2007) identified that the dynamic nature of perceived value needed to be further clarified. Within the realm of WIL, Gbadamosi et al. (2019) found that the closer data collection was to the opportunity, the stronger the scores appreciated and found a trend of diminishing scores over time. This effect was seen across students in final year along with recent graduates, but (Cranmer, 2006) also witnessed this as graduates engage with work-based training; Mahmood et al. (2014) found that there exists a disconnect between what employability is to students in comparison to organisations, so as graduates align themselves with company values, this trend is expected and often necessary to aid in graduates properly valuing their skills (Rayner and Papakonstantinou, 2015). However, this effect is often ignored in the available literature, with few recommendations suggesting remedies to this. The role employers play in 'reflective observation' (Kolb, 1984) may provide further explanation for this phenomenon. In his

critique of the experiential learning cycle, Miettinen (2000) suggests that its stages do not connect organically, and that its inorganic nature makes it liable to need external intervention - Sheth et al. (2013) provides an example of this inorganic nature, finding that longer WIL opportunities tend to continuously provide concrete experiences, preventing the transition to reflection. Past this, reflection itself presents challenges; (Smith et al., 2007) found through reflective journals (n = 9) that all students who completed WIL were able to reflect on generic skills, but unsupported, most students found difficulty with reflecting on role-specific skills. Some studies indicate that generic skills are the most sought after by employers across a global market (Gamble et al., 2010), mediating the issue, however the experiential learning cycle requires contextual examples to facilitate the movement to abstract conceptualisation and therefore student progression and development may be limited. Organisations can help provide a focus on the skills needed for employment (Jackson, 2019) and therefore narrow the focus for reflection, aiding in this transition and inadvertently changing student and graduate opinions on their WIL opportunities. This shows some of the potential benefits that organisations can provide as a stakeholder in the WIL process, yet as a stakeholder remain under-represented in the surrounding research.

Organisational Under-Representation

Despite being a key stakeholder in the WIL process (Lawlis et al., 2024b), the role organisations play remains without concrete definition. Kaider et al. (2017) expresses this role as the provision of opportunities for authentic learning, whilst Fleming et al. (2021) furthers this through the addition of mentoring and supervision responsibilities to bolster learning from experiences. The centrality of concrete experiences to stakeholders is a trend throughout this analysis, however as suppliers of these opportunities, organisations can create contexts to suit their needs and develop recognised skills (Cord et al., 2011). This originative position that organisations find themselves in would likely imply a rise in student skills and satisfaction, yet ongoing reports of skills deficiencies amongst graduates and dissatisfaction amongst target skills (CBI, 2011) remain commonplace in the realm of graduate employability.

Tiffon et al., (2017) suggests that discourse surrounding employability and skills is supply-dominant; students are wholly responsible for increasing their employability capital. From an employer perspective, employability and marketability are congruent (Mahmood et al., 2014), which aligns with the increasing attention being placed on students relating skills to their intended professions (Holmes, 2010; Tomlinson, 2012). Despite this, the reflection skills required for this and overall skill identification are a common area of difficulty for students (Smith et al., 2007). Efforts from organisations to improve marketability are increasingly being recorded, with consistent positive results – Smith et al. (2014) found that students with WIL experience and mentoring were much more accurate in estimating their skills than both those without WIL experience and students who completed WIL that forwent mentoring aspects. The impact of supervisors was also investigated by Bonnard (2020), who found that supervisors in Australia ranked students (n = 212) within WIL opportunities higher in 14/17 key skills higher than students ranked themselves, and that positive

reinforcement led to greater student confidence post-WIL. Bonnard's study focused on individual supervisor-student relationships, which may be subject to leniency biases within the rankings, however the criteria used for the rankings have been raised previously, by the likes of Nyström (2009) in raising awareness of organisational needs, and the undervaluing of skills by students is consistent with previous findings by Dunning et al. (2003). Despite organisations being able to aid in increasing employability, the integrated nature of most WIL opportunities within university curriculums has led to the conflation of graduate employability and university-identified skills (Kaider et al., 2017). As another key stakeholder within the WIL process (Lawlis et al., 2024b) involvement within outcomes is expected, however the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2014) indicate that job markets are becoming increasingly volatile and unpredictable, and that organisations are the ones most prepared to deal with these changes. This volatility directly contrasts the stagnation arising from the conflicting academic opinion toward WIL within many universities (Moore, 2010) and surmises that over-bearing university input to the WIL process is damaging to overall outcomes.

In spite of this conclusion, proper expectations within organisations need to be set in regard to the purpose of WIL. The use of WIL as a recruitment vessel remains a significant driver for participation within some industries (Blackmore et al., 2014; Crawford et al., 2024), which forgoes the basis of experiential learning that WIL is built upon – the provision of authentic learning experiences. The lack of endorsement for this practice from an academic standpoint may negatively impact the perceptions of WIL, but there are many other benefits that organisations can receive from its provision. WIL students can provide innovative perspectives to create fixes for problems where current employees may have little knowledge or skills (Thiry et al., 2011), and have the ability to accelerate work processes (Kemp et al., 2021). These students required more supervision than regular staff, however both private and public Australian organisations (n = 17) reported that the benefits outweighed any costs associated with the opportunities. This feedback is concurrent with findings from (Herbert, 2017), who found that all sponsors found WIL economically beneficial within the IT sector. Lester and Costley (2010) also found that the skills development from WIL positively benefitted organisational culture within the UK if accompanied by a strong balanced relationship between organisations and universities, a problem that is often difficult to remedy (Smith, 2003). Although employers can receive numerous potential benefits from offering WIL opportunities, the provision of these is often impacted by inequity to access them.

Contextuality and Inequity

Whilst inclusive WIL opportunities and equitable outcomes are a supposed strategic priority for universities (Thompson and Brewster, 2023), many host organisations of WIL opportunities have experienced difficulties in adapting workplace practices (Nolan et al., 2015) and equitable access is a recognised issue for many groups such as international students, women, students with disabilities and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Ferns et al., 2014).

Opportunities to experience WIL are limited outside of traditional markets, for instance the UK or Australia, and present methods for international students to pursue post-graduate employment (Vu

et al., 2023) or improve their academic performance through the development of transferable skills (Crawford and Wang, 2016). However, the contextual foundation of WIL stands to oppose the interests of international students. Contextually rich environments stand as the bases of concrete experiences and inform the whole experiential learning cycle from which learners can use learned contexts to create theories that are applicable to new scenarios (Kolb, 1984). However, Kolb's theory and the surrounding literature is based in American environments (Morris, 2020), and as such fails to consider the feasibility of developed theories when exposed to different working cultures; whilst the percentage of students granted further leave to remain rose from 18% to 56% between 2019 and 2023 (UK Home Office, 2024), this indicates a sizeable minority of international students who intend to work or study in different contexts. Rakowska and de Juana-Espinosa (2021) view that the contextual benefits of office experience are not transferable and can cause hindrances when adapting to international work climates. Generic skills have been seen to have the greatest impact on improving the employability of international students (Freudenberg and Belle Isle, 2021) and serve as a mediator against the loss of contextual experience, however this effect has been witnessed most in students who seek WIL opportunities independently rather than rely on their university for provision (Vu et al., 2023). This presents further issues when examining the main concern raised by international students regarding WIL access, centre on the recruitment process, residency and visa queries and communication skills (Crawford et al., 2024), which suggests the need for more informal WIL opportunities.

The concern of international students towards communication skills is further ratified within the literature. The quality of social interactions directly impacts the quality of authentic learning (Billett, 2004; Korte, 2009; Davies and Sandiford, 2014). Although Cook et al. (2015) has found that WIL has the potential to boost self-confidence, the lack of pro-activity witnessed in students due to anxiety and a fear of poor feedback (Eden, 2014) leads to a lack of development in cultural communication and overall communication skills adds to poorly developed cultural communication and general communication skills in traditional long-term placements (Eames and Bell, 2005; Pham et al., 2018). From the perspective of cognitive science, the 'learning spiral' and capabilities of people grow over time (Schenck and Cruickshank, 2015) and respond better to short-term exposure to stimuli, which could point toward the need for more short-scale WIL opportunities. From an academic perspective, whilst Crawford and Wang (2016) found that international students could raise their grades by partaking in WIL, this effect was lower than the raise in grades experienced by home students. This disparity in attainment sits in line with contemporary recommendations from Fruhstorfer et al. (2024), in that studies should place more emphasis on the educational process of WIL, rather than their blanket effectiveness. These findings, in regard to both employability and educational attainment, use literature that largely treats international students as a homogenous group and fails to distinguish between factors such as degree levels – this is due to the lack of availability of more precise literature, but fails to consider the criticisms of Cull et al. (2022).

Whilst reluctance to disclose gender and gender identity has the potential to cause minor issues with WIL experience (Mallozzi and Drewery, 2019), major concerns arise around the interaction between organisational culture and gender and their implications on the inherent risk of active

experimentation. Gender biases are more normalised within organisations (Acker, 2012), with this going further in fields such as STEM that outwardly reject femininity (Francis et al., 2017). Whilst these biases outwardly affect the organisational image and enrolment onto available WIL experiences (Hay and Fleming, 2024), their potential to impact perceptions of competence and consequent recognition (Acker, 2012) present deeper issues. Desired skills such as communication and leadership are often a focus of WIL development when organisations provide input (Mahmood et al., 2014) yet are areas that gender biases are most present. Active and more controlling communication and leadership styles may be seen as responsible in men yet are characterised as aggressive in women due to their incongruence with typical gender values (Rhee and Sigler, 2015), with the converse participatory leadership style emphasising female weakness whilst emanating trust from their male counterparts. This inequity pushes many women to adopt the characteristics of male counterparts to gain recognition (Martin and Barnard, 2013), but merely exacerbates the suppression of initiative witnessed within WIL environments (Rowe and Zegwaard, 2017) and limits attainment from the experience, whilst damaging their personal character through emotional repression (Bowen et al., 2023). Jampol and Zayas (2021) found that women are on average treated more benignly than men, even when under-performing, and as such many women ignore positive feedback and remain at low levels of valued competence. Valued competence directly impacts a sense of belonging and self-efficacy (Bowen, 2020; Knekta et al., 2020), creating a negative feedback loop that consistently impacts women in WIL opportunities and also contributes to lower levels of perceived employability in women (Qenani et al., 2014), a phenomenon also witnessed in those from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Clarke, 2018) and those with disabilities (Magrin et al., 2019), populations that are often marginalised within society. Diverse WIL opportunities and a focus on socialisation created partial remedies to the highlighted issues (Hora et al., 2021), but overhauls to organisational cultures and more communication between WIL stakeholders remain at the heart of potential solutions.

Clarity around stakeholder responsibilities and communication also run core to issues with WIL and students with disabilities (Lawlis et al., 2024b). Host organisations in this study that held students with a disability (n = 14) reported that to provide a continuous, optimal WIL experience, disclosure from students about their disability was necessary. This desire has often translated to a pressure on students towards disclosure (Brown et al., 2006), despite organisations being aware of the presence of bias against disabilities (Epstein et al., 2020) and the need for internal culture shifts and training (Lawlis et al., 2024a). Students with disabilities may choose not to disclose them due to fears of discrimination, fitting-in and social isolation (Ashcroft and Lutfiyya, 2013; Dollinger et al., 2023), and knowledge of disabilities and procedure is limited in organisations; Lawlis et al. (2024b)'s study found that only 32% of participating organisations (n = 28) had existing policies surrounding adjustments for disabilities, and no participating organisation was aware of university policies surrounding support of students with disabilities. The promotion of inclusivity in organisations through advertisement of the programs is recommended as a potential solution by (Lawlis et al., 2024b), yet the present inequity in stakeholder understanding, combined with the lack of alignment of expectations for these students may lead to lessened access for WIL selection (Mackaway and Winchester-Seeto, 2018) and tensions between stakeholders. Inclusivity reduces conflict within organisations and between stakeholders (Ferns et al., 2014), and solutions to problems raised in this section stand to aid in stakeholder equity

and mediate issues throughout the WIL process. Alternatives such as online (Bell et al., 2021) and short-term (Jackson, 2015) WIL experiences provide other solutions to access and reduce the negative implications of disability disclosure on performance whilst providing more opportunities for organisations to provide suitable adjustments, yet these still rely on equitable tripartite stakeholder communication for success, which remains difficult with present workplace biases towards disabilities (Hay and Fleming, 2024).

In Summary, WIL has become an increasingly popular tool by which students can gain concrete experiences and learn authentically (Harper, 2018; Smith and Segbers, 2018), facilitated through a tripartite agreement between organisations, universities and students (Lawlis et al., 2024b). This analysis of the available literature has uncovered numerous issues with access to WIL (Mackaway and Winchester-Seeto, 2018; Crawford et al., 2024), provision of traditional WIL schemes such as long-term placements (Eames and Bell, 2005; Rowe and Zegwaard, 2017; Pham et al., 2018) and inequity in the expectations and roles of stakeholders involved (Moore, 2010; Jackson and Chapman, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2022). Available literature surrounding WIL is thorough in its exploration of general efficacy of opportunities and contemporary literature has placed a greater emphasis on increasing access to opportunities for marginalised groups (Hay and Fleming, 2024). However, previously raised issues into the conflation of the definitions of WBL, WIL and WIE raise questions into the reliability of older literature, and there is a general lack of research into WIL post-COVID, which changed workplace practices and stakeholder attitudes (Kniffin et al., 2021).

Research Project Statements

Research Aim: The aim is to gain insights from both the targeted student demographic and the participating employers, aiming to understand their perspectives and experiences with this micro-internship initiative.

Research Question: What are the student and employer perceptions of the effectiveness and inclusiveness of Liverpool Business School's micro-internship scheme in providing a valuable work-based learning opportunity?

Research Objective 1: Explore the perceptions and experiences of UG and PG students participating in the micro-internships

Research Objective 2: Assess students' perceived value of the micro-internship opportunity as an effective and inclusive way to acquire work-based learning.

Research Objective 3: Gain insights from the employers who provide the micro-internship opportunities.
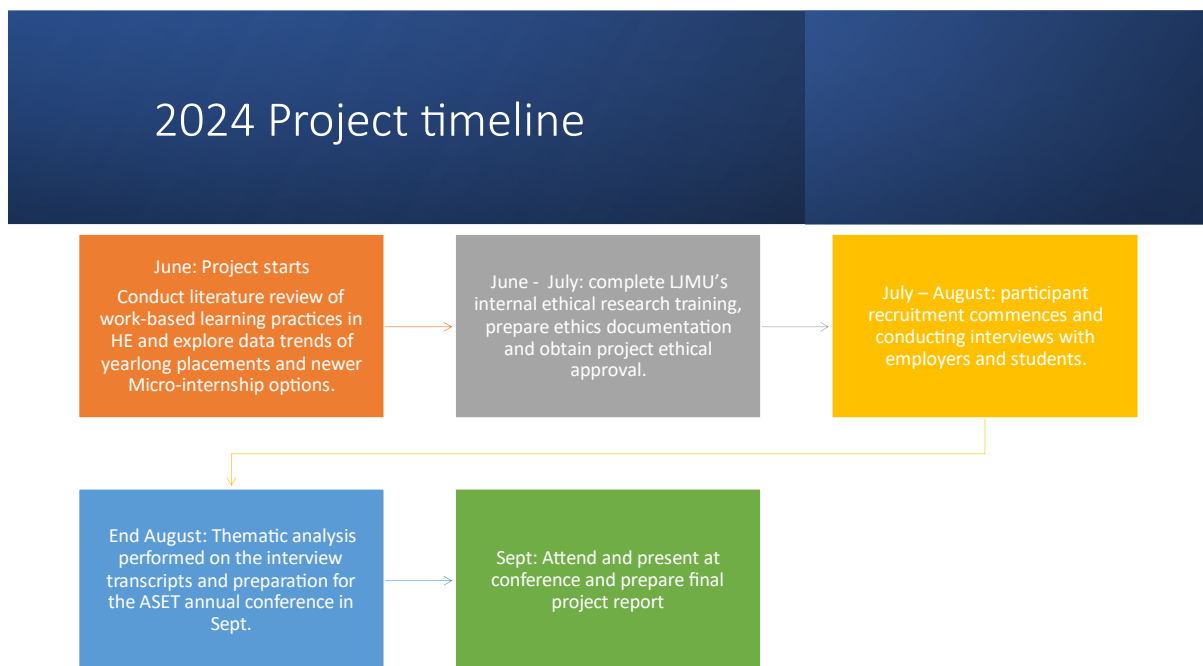
5. Methods

The aim of this qualitative research is to investigate the experiences of students and organisations as stakeholders through the micro-internship schemes delivered through Liverpool Business School. To address this aim, this project holds the following three research objectives:

RO1: Explore the perceptions and experiences of UG and PG students participating in the micro-internships.

RO2: Assess students' perceived value of the micro-internship opportunity as an effective and inclusive way to acquire work-based learning.

RO3: Gain insights from the employers who provide the micro-internship opportunities.

This study adopted the use of qualitative research involving a case study design through a series of semi-structured interviews in the summer of 2024, with participant students and organisation representatives.

2024 Project timeline

June: Project starts
Conduct literature review of work-based learning practices in HE and explore data trends of yearlong placements and newer Micro-internship options.

June - July: complete LJMU's internal ethical research training, prepare ethics documentation and obtain project ethical approval.

July – August: participant recruitment commences and conducting interviews with employers and students.

End August: Thematic analysis performed on the interview transcripts and preparation for the ASET annual conference in Sept.

Sept: Attend and present at conference and prepare final project report

Case Study Design

A case study is an inquiry towards an action that occurs within real-life contexts (Yin, 2017). This study employs an explanatory multiple case study approach; using multiple case studies (student and employer experiences of the micro-internships), we can attempt to extrapolate findings to create generalisations for this form of micro-internships and recommendations for future research. The micro-internships were carried out across multiple sectors and involved students from across Liverpool Business School, so a multiple case-study approach allows for proper consideration of stakeholder individuality (Grix, 2019). As this study is being conducted under ASET funding, we can ensure that this study is embedded in a wider body of research into WBL and that we did not become too immersed in case study details (Blaxter et al., 2010).

Data Collection

The Sample

All students who participated in at least one micro-internship, along with representatives from each organisation, were invited to take part in the research. So far, a total of 5 micro-internship experiences were held, with a total sample size of 30 students and 5 organisational representatives. From this total sample, 6 students and 2 organisational representatives responded. The exclusion criteria for this project stand as not being a representative of a company involved in delivery of a micro-internship, or not having participated in a micro-internship as a student. To access the sample, convenience sampling will be used. Some participant students are no longer enrolled within LJMU, and as such may be more difficult to contact. This may reduce the generalisability of the data; however, probability samples are ill-suited to developmental research projects (Jager et al., 2017), and convenience sampling ensured the greatest probability of access to the identified sample as many students are no longer enrolled at LJMU, so are less likely to engage with university-related emails (McMahon, 2021).

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather primary data relating to the 3 research objectives, the interview schedules for which can be found in Appendix A. Interview questions have been developed in consultation with the literature base and use of the 2 main concepts (Kolb's experiential learning cycle and perceived value), aligning with the project's research objectives whilst utilising the literature to accurately gather data relevant to personal experience. These concepts are well-explored and defined, at least characteristically, within the literature, so questions derived from these definitions are likely to accurately assess them. Literature reviews have the potential to reflect researcher bias (Tranfield et al., 2003), so the explored literature has the potential to not fully reflect the breadth of the concepts used in this project, however each concept has been reviewed with literature spanning decades, suggesting a thorough review of available reports.

Bryman and Burgess (1994) express concerns over the replicability of qualitative research, which has been witnessed in past studies, however this effect is more prominent in areas with considerable amounts of literature. Micro-internships and WIL after COVID are both areas lacking in current available literature, as discussed above, so this causes little concern. Although the use of quantitative methods would improve this issue, due to less reliance on researcher ingenuity (Bell et al., 2022), quantitative data tends to omit the interpretation of human experiences, whilst diminishing the perspectives of respondents (Blumer, 1956) which are crucial to this research.

Perceived value (in relation to RO2) is a subjective construct, with limited characteristics defined within the literature, so the use of interviews allows for the gathering of experiences, which run core to the research objectives and literature through Kolb's experiential learning cycle. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allows for probing questions, which can guide participants to aid gathering answers which better detail a concept that is vague to both researchers and participants (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021). Interviews have the potential to create overly rationalistic views of human behaviour (Atkinson and Silverman, 1997), however experiences and motives are resistant

to observation (Bell et al., 2022), and other data collection methods do not create the freedom necessary for these observations to be witnessed.

The interviews were carried out thematically, with questions aligned to "Applying for the Micro-Internship, the Micro-Internship Experience and Outcomes". These questions were preceded and followed by open-ended questions to ensure respondents felt comfortable whilst creating a focus on the research topic. Interviews were carried out via Microsoft Teams. This aimed to reduce the participant burden and improve internal validity whilst further easing the process to access participants, as many are no longer enrolled with LJMU.

Qualitative Data Analysis

This project produced quantitative data, which has been analysed using a combination of inductive and deductive thematic analysis.

The thematic analysis was conducted semantically – the research objectives, which informed the research design and interview questions, are based on concrete experiences (derived from Kolb) and perceived value which are inherently contextual and subjective. A latent approach would allow for researcher bias to affect coding, and purported findings may not have been truly relevant to the experiences of participants (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

There exists little literature surrounding non-traditional WIL experiences such as micro-internships. Conducting a deductive thematic analysis would create a latent bias within the coding, as the literature base is heavily skewed towards traditional placements and would likely not be representative of the perceived value of the micro-internships.

Thematic analysis was carried out using Braun and Clarke's 6 stage model (Braun, Virginia and Clarke, Victoria, 2021). Familiarisation occurred through listening to the recorded interviews and ensuring the generated transcript from Microsoft Teams was accurate. From this, the process of coding and initial theme generation took place to highlight easily identifiable themes and groupings, which were then reviewed and defined to clear themes, which are explored in the Results section. Constant comparison was used through the analysing and review of thematic data and helps prevent overemphasis on early aspects identified (Stake, 2010). Themes were identified and reviewed using Ryan and Bernard's (2003) recommendations, such as repetition.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to commencement of the project, ethical approval was gained from LJMU's University Research Ethics Committee (Ethics reference number: [24/LBS/029], Date: 22/07/2024) and the project was conducted within the university ethical guidelines.

6. <u>Findings</u>

A total of 6 students and 2 employers took part in the semi-structured interviews. The table below show a break-down of the student participant group:

Table 1: Student Participants

Participant	Gender	Domicile	Level of Study	Micro-Internships participated in
A	Female	International Student	PGT	2
B	Female	International Student	PGT	1
C	Female	Home	UG	1
D	Male	International	UG	1
E	Male	Home	UG	1
F	Male	Home	UG	1

Two employers took part in an interview, they were both local organisations who had offered LBS students a micro-internship with themselves in the past 12 months.

This section will now outline the results and the analysis pertaining to the projects' three Research Objectives:

RO1: Explore the perceptions and experiences of UG and PG students participating in the micro-internships.
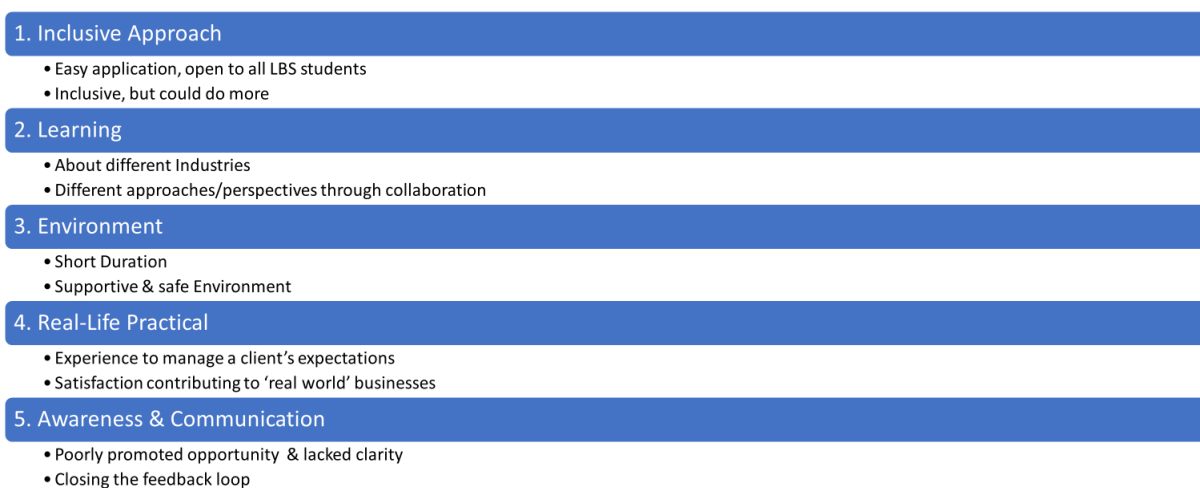
RO2: Assess students' perceived value of the micro-internship opportunity as an effective and inclusive way to acquire work-based learning.

RO3: Gain insights from the employers who provide the micro-internship opportunities.

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RO1: Explore the perceptions and experiences of UG and PG students participating in the micro-internships.

The thematic analysis generated five key themes for the first research objective.

Figure 1: themes generated for to RO1

1. Inclusive Approach
• Easy application, open to all LBS students • Inclusive, but could do more
2. Learning
• About different Industries • Different approaches/perspectives through collaboration
3. Environment
• Short Duration • Supportive & safe Environment
4. Real-Life Practical
• Experience to manage a client's expectations • Satisfaction contributing to 'real world' businesses
5. Awareness & Communication
• Poorly promoted opportunity & lacked clarity • Closing the feedback loop

1. *Inclusive approach*

The students highlighted the importance of inclusivity in the micro-internship opportunities, in that they were accessible to all students, regardless of background, skill level, or experience. The application process was noticeably easier for students too:

> *"There was just a little e-mail saying why I'd be right for it* [the micro-internship], *but it was quite easy….it was just an expression of interest and I got it".* Participant F

> *"I think it was just more convenient as well. Just doing a quick e-mail and seeing if I got a response... So I think it was a good way to go about it because it was, it didn't feel like a job interview. It just felt like whoever's generally interested can have an opportunity to go"* Participant C

However, some students did feel that the internship day experience could be even more inclusive by either offering some form of payment for the day to students or covering travel/subsistence.

> *"I know that it is unpaid internship and it's fine. But one point, students, they need to pay to get the transport there and for food and not everyone have the conditions to do that, or they have to sacrifice something for that. ….So they could provide for the ones that need support, because I heard for a student who was in the same lectures as me, say no, I don't think that is worth it that I have to spend for lunch and transport in my time off, and then she didn't apply".* Participant A

2. Learning

Learning was a central component identified by the students, stating that the micro-internship provided students with the opportunity to gain new knowledge, develop skills, and enhance their business understanding in a practical learning experience.

"I think that this experience for me was really really nice because there were a lot of students to exchange knowledge... every group presented different approaches". Participant A

"Well, it was my first time in an office... So I think it was even just how to dress in the morning, being on time, time management of the day. It was nice to experience what an actual work day would be like for the people that were planning the festival... So I think it was good that I had an idea of what a nine to five could look like in this sector because I'd never done anything like that before. So it was nice to have an insight to go, oh, this is what I could be doing when I graduate". Participant C

"This is my first time in a modern technology kind of office environment, like a work of the future kind of thing". Participant D

"They give us a proper insight to financial perspectives and sales perspective, marketing perspective and how they do their own work, like how they market the clients, how they do marketing, how they do bring sponsorships. And then also they were also open about the information about how they go to different countries to get the new markets". Participant E

3. Environment

The environment refers to the setting in which the micro-internship experience takes place. Students reported that they felt the one-day events were supportive and engaging, with a dynamic atmosphere where students felt comfortable and motivated to collaborate, share ideas, and apply what they've learned. Students therefore found the micro-internship a safe place for them to discover more self-confidence and develop their own abilities in a workplace context:

"I had the opportunity to unlock myself to do a presentation and to express my ideas. I was so shy when I start in my masters...I know I'm in the country, of course there are British people, but sometimes I felt judged with my accent and the way that I expressed my ideas and had this experience, I was grateful that I could express it not in my [course] mates, but with the proper professional team that could judge me in a way that I would be judged in the future. So yeah, it was really valuable... the opportunity to freely speak in English and having a proper professional speech to defend an idea and arguing it in my second language. It's made me enhance my confidence... that was the highest for me, the most important". Participant A

"They were very, very helpful as well because all the staff were in the contact with me throughout the whole application, from applying for it to getting selected for that, they all were present during the whole micro-internship day. They didn't even go anywhere. They

were just literally helpful and they were just constantly giving us feedback, doing the whole day as well that OK you, you are getting slower and how you can make it more efficient and everything they are, they will like literally feeding us good information and very positive information". Participant D

However, the micro-internship was considered too short by some students, who would have preferred a slight extension to the day-long experience:

"I think that one day passes so fast, especially because we are not talking about a full day, we're talking normally something that's officially start at 10:00 and finish around 5:00… I think that if we can have two days experience, it will be really nice… because then we have example at night, the time to process and think about I, then the next day people have the energy to come and change it a bit more" Participant A

"Only drawback would be it should be little bit more longer. That's what I would say that because a one-day internship can be hectic, because there are a lot of information they're trying to give you and sometimes your concentration gets low by the end of the day and you start losing information". Participant D

"It was like a reasonable about the time I think that was a good enough, you know, insight to what it's like. I mean, I definitely think could be options for you know, two or three day ones, but then obviously brings in like timetabling issues and everything like everyone's gonna be free for all, you know, certain amount of days". Participant F

4. *Real-Life Practical experience*

The experience is grounded in practical, real-world applications, which was particularly welcomed by the students. Participants liked being given the chance to work on authentic business challenges or industry-related tasks that reflect the complexities of real-life scenarios organisations face, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge in a meaningful way.

"was really nice to have in a real project that we are sure that will be applied….I think that it was the highlight, like having the chance to be inserting into a real project, with something that is applicable and to be able to discuss it with others…I think that was nice because the clients like it a lot our proposal". Participant A

"So that was a catch for me, that you work with an industry live project to test your knowledge and, you know, put into practise what you've learnt". Participant B

"it's like from a point of view for what I wanna do in business work and it like a business consultancy that's more in line with like my interests and it was putting a lot more of the stuff that I find interesting and like the like the business". Participant F

5. *Awareness & Communication*

Regarding the micro-internship experiences themselves, students not always aware they were available, and students often only found out through word-of-mouth or informally. Students also reported that improved communication on the micro-internship opportunities would help generate more interest in these amongst fellow students.

> *"I think that it is not promoted very well and we could use more of what the students are doing and promote through the students and share goals and also share if it's possible with the clients to keep working with them"*. Participant A

> *"but I wouldn't have applied if he* [my lecturer] *didn't mention how good it would have been as an opportunity it was"*. Participant C

> *"I think it was emailed to me the first one, I don't think anyone told me about it in person which I didn't like, cause I wasn't sure about it"*. Participant F

RO2: Assess students' perceived value of the micro-internship opportunity as an effective and inclusive way to acquire work-based learning.

The thematic analysis generated three key themes for the second research objective.

Figure 2: themes generated for to RO2
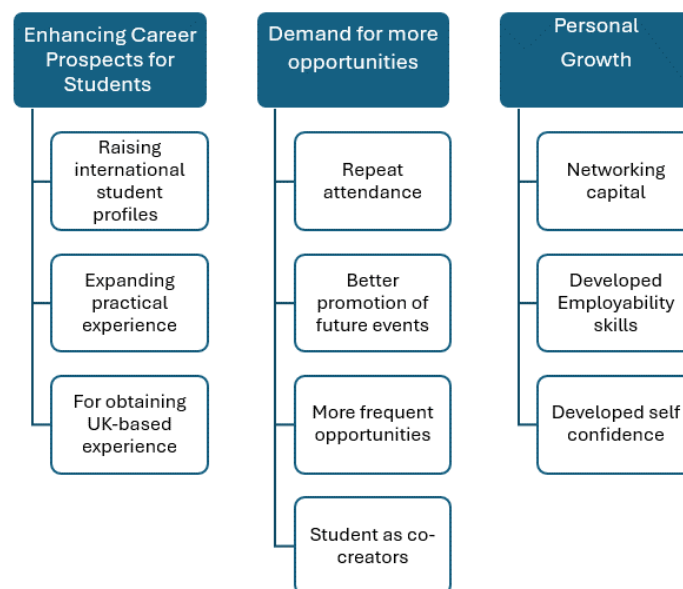
Enhancing Career Prospects

This was universal for all students taking part in the interviews – they felt this was a great addition to their CVs and provided relevant business work experience, which could only further enhance their future job prospects. This, however, was especially true for international students, citing that the

micro-internship experience increased their visibility, enabled them to connect with other students and professionals, and strengthen ties UK companies. This would then help international students build credibility and showcase their work in the UK, which can boost their professional profiles and career prospects:

> *"it was nice for the experience for me, especially because, as I said, is the first time that I come to the UK… I don't have any experience in the UK… even one day experience in a recognised company here* [in the UK]*, it makes a difference…I think that it's opened doors on my LinkedIn… I reflected on each one through my LinkedIn posts. I shared about the experience and how it was important…I can post about my experience. I can share what I did and I can amplify my networking, so I can interact with other students that be in the professional world, so I also could amplify my interactions with the LJMU team, it was really nice…Sometimes it's difficult, especially for the international students, to get an experience and this type of experience help us to open the doors and share UK experience in our professional profiles and shout out OK, I had a contact with a UK company, I worked in a project here"* Participant A

> *"I need to do this because it was such a good experience. And I did get an industry job out of that micro internship"* Participant C

> *"I have work experience within football mainly... I'd really love to work with the sports industry, but also I want to open up my mind towards different sectors and this company is also working in the sports industry. They have more clients are from a sports industry"* Participant D

Demand for more opportunities

Since March 2023, there have been five micro-internship experiences offered within LBS, typically running once per semester. The students in the interviews felt that this could be increased to provide more industry-based experiences throughout the year. Having more micro-internship opportunities on offer, which are better publicised and promoted, would result in more students being able to access this experience.

> *"I would like to have more! For example if we had more than two, we had three or throughout the academic semesters, for example 2* [micro-internships] *for each academic semesters"* Participant A

> *"And another thing is, if this internship has more, maybe not just once in a while, maybe an opinion poll where students will select which preference they want"* Participant B

Personal Growth

The micro-internship provided an opportunity for students to practice their skills and capability and this helped to hone their qualities further:

"To self-confidence, yes... it gave me an opportunity to be able to put that into practise. So it's more like enhancing that you've learned something and you can apply it and it can be appreciated" Participant B

"Seeing myself in a professional environment with new people and as well the confidence of just knowing if I was put somewhere I could thrive in it, knowing that I went in and I give was given a task, I executed it and I got something out of it" Participant C

RO3: Gain insights from the employers who provide the micro-internship opportunities.

The two employer interviews revealed both key benefits and some challenges of the micro-internship scheme. Both employers valued the micro-internship experience as an effective way to build a talent pipeline, offering a largely cost-free opportunity to meet potential future employees and expand their network with the next cohort of graduates. The micro-internship scheme also helped businesses solve specific current issues they were facing, such as bringing in expertise to address operational challenges, like improving marketing for a community cinema. Project preparation time was minimal for the employers, as they often had pre-defined problems and data ready, requiring only the coordination of the day itself. Employers had usual expectations of students, emphasising professionalism, punctuality, and a willingness to learn. Whilst the employers found the scheme brought business benefits, including fresh, innovative ideas that led them to explore new opportunities, there was an acknowledgment of resource-constrained small businesses, which struggled to fully develop ideas created from internships due to limited capacity.

Table 2: The thematic analysis outcomes for the Employer views on why they participated in the micro internship

Theme	Employer Quote
Talent Pipeline	*"It seems like a no brainer for me and it was quite appealing that you know there was no cost to the business, but it was a good chance for us to meet some new talent, some potential candidates for future roles should they emerge... The biggest thing for me personally was meeting some new talent because in our business, new opportunities can come up very quickly. And so it's, I always think it's quite wise to you know, broaden your network and have a have a kind of a bench or a short list of people in the local area that you know are hungry for new opportunities "* E1
To solve an issue	*"...we wanted to continue to offer the Community cinema, but we were making a loss on it. So we were exploring ways to bring expertise in to kind of develop the marketing around and then kind of model around the Community cinema."* - E2
Project preparation time	*"Not a great deal. We had an existing problem, and we had… we had, we had a well-defined existing problem and we had the data to kind of support that problem. We didn't, I don't think we did a lot of prep at all, it was mostly just arranging to have the right people there in order to deliver.*" E2 *"Not a lot really, so I had a couple of chats with the marketing team on Slack. I think I sent across a couple of ideas*" E1
Expectations of Student	*"We expected them to, I suppose all the normal things that you'd expect, expect them to behave in a professional way. We expect them to attend on time and to kind of, to do the project that we'd ask them to do"* E2 *"Expectations, so I think my main expectation or hope I suppose, was that they'd actually want to learn... But I was just hoping that they were going to be attentive and actually pay attention and make a good effort. That's the main thing"* E1
Business Benefits	*"It threw up some interesting ideas, so, and that's a plus. And I think there are avenues that we perhaps went down and explored because of the micro internship"* – E2
Challenges	*"But I think also one of the challenges of it is that we're very resource poor as an organisation which we're covering a lot of different fronts and we're a very, very, very small team and so in some ways, like we don't necessarily have the capacity to develop ideas in that way"* - E 2

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The results of our research provide valuable insights into student experiences with the micro-internship scheme (RO1). Overall, students expressed a strong desire for more opportunities like this in the future. The micro-internship experience allowed students to develop essential skills, competencies, and networking capital that they might not have had access to otherwise. A recurring theme that emerged during interviews was the benefit of learning through observation and collaboration with peers and professionals. Students reflected on how exposure to different problem-solving approaches enriched their own understanding and skills, contributing to both personal and professional growth.

Another significant finding is how some students maximised the micro-internship experiences by sharing them on professional platforms like LinkedIn. Sharing these experiences not only amplified their networking opportunities but also strengthened their professional profiles, particularly for international students. The opportunity to engage in the micro-internship enabled students to signal their involvement in UK-based projects and expand their reach into wider jobs market. This aspect of professional self-promotion highlights the importance of linking experiential learning with visibility in the digital professional world, further enhancing the benefits of such internship schemes.

Regarding the perceived value of the micro-internship as an inclusive and effective form of work-based learning (RO2), students confirmed its usefulness in helping them gain practical experience. Many participants, particularly those with limited access to traditional internships or work placements, noted that the micro-internship provided them with the much-needed UK experience that could otherwise be difficult to obtain, especially for international students. However, students also identified a need for better communication and promotion of these opportunities, suggesting that more could be done to ensure broader student participation and provide more of these micro-internship days throughout the year. This feedback calls for a review of resource allocation toward targeted publicity, ensuring that all eligible students are well-informed and have equal access to these opportunities whilst also increasing awareness in students for future eligibility.

Unlike yearlong placements or lengthy summer internships, micro-internships serve as shorter interventions, catering to a more diverse student body who may suffer from greater time-constraints or be dealing with various commitments. The results of this study show that the students and employers found these day-long experiences valuable.

From the employer perspective (RO3), feedback was similarly positive. Employers found the micro-internship scheme to be highly resource-efficient, as it required minimal investment while offering substantial returns. Employers reported that these internships brought fresh ideas into their businesses, with students contributing innovative solutions to business challenges. Furthermore, the internships provided a valuable opportunity for employers to identify potential future talent, helping to bridge the gap between academic learning and the professional world. This positive reception from employers reinforces the mutual benefits of the program and highlights its potential for scalability.

Understanding more about student and employer experiences of this emerging one-day approach, means that we can now provide research-informed materials to future students and potential employers collaborators about the benefits of shorter-term work-based learning experiences. Micro-internships are more likely to attract a broader range of participants, including those who might not typically pursue longer term opportunities or who are international students unfamiliar with the lengthy recruitment processes for yearlong company placements. As such, these findings will likely be of interest to other institutions who recruit similarly diverse student groups. Those in the wider higher education sector would be interested to learn more about our micro-internship approach, the student and employer viewpoints of this initiative and the perceived value of engaging in this type of work-based learning. Our research could also encourage other institutions to develop similar micro-internship opportunities within their schools as a more inclusive way to engage students with work-based learning experiences, or adapt marketing schemes of current micro-internship schemes to improve engagement from the wider student body.

Likewise, local employers may also be interested in the findings of this research. Smaller local employers are often unable to commit to supporting a student for a year or for 12 weeks over the summer period but may be able to offer up 1-day, which means the insights gained from this project may help to recruit more employers for wider micro-internships and provide benefits for all parties involved.

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9. <u>Appendices</u>

<u>Appendix A: Micro-internship Project: Student Interview</u>

Firstly, thank you again for meeting with me today to take part in this semi-structured interview, I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me and expect this interview to last no longer than 45 mins. Please feel free to talk freely in this interview and as explained in the Participant Information Sheet, if you feel uncomfortable at any point, we can stop the interview immediately. As a reminder, you have agreed to have this interview being recorded, so if you are happy to proceed, I'll start recording now.

<press record>

Thank you <name> for talking to me today, I will now proceed to ask you approximately 16 questions pertaining to your involvement and experience of the micro-internship scheme.

Section 1: Icebreakers:

1) Can you tell me a little bit about why you chose this course to study at LJMU?

2) Before starting your course here at LJMU, what work experiences had you already obtained?

a. Prompt: did you have part-time work experience, any volunteering, prior internships?

Section 2: Applying for the Micro-Internship

3) How did you learn about the micro-internship opportunity?

a. Prompt: was this from a staff email, or did you know someone else who had been on a micro-internship before (i.e. word-of-mouth)

4) What attracted you initially to this one-day micro-internship?

a. Prompt: Were you looking for work experience?

5) How did you find the application process for this opportunity?

a. Prompt: how did it compare to other job applications you may have completed?

Section 3: The Micro-Internship Experience

6) What was the day like on the micro-internship? Can you provide an overview of what you did?

7) Given that this is a one-day opportunity, how much insight to the 'world of work' has this given you? Can you provide an example?

8)   How valuable was this practical experience, i.e. was this a good use of your day and why?

9)   Do you have any view on the timing in the academic year and one-day duration of this work experience?

Section 4: Outcomes

10)   Can you provide any specific examples of key skills that you feel the micro-internship experience helped you to develop in a 'hands-on' way?

a.   Prompt: networking, group-work, communication, problem-solving.

11)   Do you feel as though the micro-internship has had any impact on your self-confidence?

a.   Prompt: has your confidence developed through having practical experience in the workplace?

12)   What are your reflections on the micro-internship experience?

a.   Prompt: have they changed over time?

13)   What do you consider to be the benefits and drawbacks to the micro-internship scheme?

14)   What are your views on the role of LJMU in organising and planning this micro-internship experience?

Section 5: Final comments

15)   Is this an inclusive way to help more students gain work-based learning experience?

a.   Prompt: more accessible for international students, those with caring responsibilities etc.

16)   What advice would you give to other students who have not yet been on a micro-internship, would you recommend this one-day experience and why?

Thank you again for taking part in this interview today. If you have any later questions about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me on the details provided in the Participant Information Sheet. As a reminder, if you wish to remove your data from this project, this can only be done up until the data analysis phase, at which point, all respondents will be anonymised.

Appendix B: Micro-internship Project: Employer Interview

Firstly, thank you again for meeting with me today to take part in this semi-structured interview, I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me and expect this interview to last no longer than 40 mins. Please feel free to talk freely in this interview and as explained in the Participant Information Sheet, if you feel uncomfortable at any point, we can stop the interview immediately. As a reminder, you have agreed to have this interview being recorded, so if you are happy to proceed, I'll start recording now.

<press record>

Thank you <name> for talking to me today, I will now proceed to ask you approximately 11 questions pertaining to your involvement and experience of the micro-internship scheme.

Section 1: Icebreaker:

1)   Can you tell me a little bit about your relationship with LJMU – how did you first become involved with Liverpool Business School and the Business Clinic?

Section 2: Offering a Micro-Internship

2)   What prior experience do you or your company have of offering work-based learning opportunities to university students?

3)   What first motivated you to put yourself and your company forward for offering a micro-internship scheme to LJMU students?

4)   How much planning and preparation was required on your part to develop the micro-internship event?

a.   Prompt: what resources were needed, i.e. staffing, rooming, data etc.

Section 3: The Micro-Internship Experience

5)   What were your expectations of the students on the one-day micro-internship?

6)   What were your first impressions of the students' professionalism?

7)   What skills are most important for your business and did the micro-internship provide experience for students to develop these? Can you provide an example?

8)   Were you happy with Liverpool Business School's role in the organisation of the micro-internship?

Section 4: Outcomes

9)   Did you benefit from the micro-internship as a business? Can you explain further?

10)   Have you implemented any of the suggestions from students towards the business problems identified in the brief?

11)   Did you feel valued as a stakeholder in this project?

Prompts: Were you happy with how you were treated? Were you happy with the responsibilities given to you?

Thank you again for taking part in this interview today. If you have any later questions about this research, please do not hesitate to contact me on the details provided in the Participant Information Sheet. As a reminder, if you wish to remove your data from this project, this can only be done up until the data analysis phase, at which point, all respondents will be anonymised.