

What a Difference a Day Makes: International Students' Experiences of Inclusive Short-Form Work-Integrated Learning

Abstract

Purpose

Work-Integrated learning is widely recognised as an effective approach for supporting students' employability and professional capability development. Yet access to traditional internships and placements can be limited, particularly for international students facing structural and visa-related barriers. This study explores the potential of a short-form work-integrated learning intervention: a one-day micro-internship, designed to provide authentic industry engagement within a compressed timeframe.

Design

Adopting a case study methodology at one UK Business School, this qualitative study draws on interviews with nine international students who participated in a one-day micro-internship to explore how the experience supported their professional and personal development, and career readiness.

Findings

Thematic analysis identified six themes: authentic exposure to business practice; experiential learning bridging theory and practice; development of professional capabilities and workplace skills; the accessibility and inclusivity of the format; growth in career capital and professional identity; and suggestions for enhancing programme design. Findings indicate that even brief, structured industry engagement can support meaningful learning, confidence, workplace communication and insight into professional practice.

Originality

Responding to persistent inequities in access to traditional placements, this paper advances understanding of micro-internships as an under-explored yet potentially more inclusive model of work-integrated learning. It offers new empirical evidence that even brief industry engagement can support professional capability development, career readiness and self-efficacy amongst international students, challenging assumptions that meaningful experiential learning requires sustained placements.

Keywords – Work-integrated learning; inclusive education; internship; career transitions; competence and skills.

Paper Type – Research Paper

Introduction

Global student mobility has grown significantly, with over six million students now studying outside their home country (UNESCO, 2025). Historically, the United Kingdom, alongside the United States, Canada and Australia, were the top four global study destinations (Cameron *et al.*, 2019), with China and India representing two of the largest source markets for globally mobile students (OECD, 2025). However, recent changes to country immigration policies, combined with growing student interest in post-study employment opportunities, are reshaping these mobility patterns (McKinney and Gower, 2024). Traditional South-to-North student mobility is changing (Keystone Education Group, 2025) with competition between host countries intensifying.

International students are increasingly motivated by enhanced career opportunities (Silvanto *et al.*, 2017; Tran *et al.*, 2020). While earlier models suggested that students preferred to return to their home countries after graduation, this pattern has evolved, with many now seeking to build international careers and pursue onward mobility (Tran *et al.*, 2020). As a result, graduate employability has become a key factor influencing study destination and institutional choice (Cameron *et al.*, 2019; Reid, 2022). Consequently, there is now even greater emphasis on the employability outcomes associated with studying abroad (IHEC, 2024).

Despite strong employment aspirations, international students encounter structural barriers to accessing labour market opportunities in host countries. These include visa restrictions, limited access and unfamiliarity with local labour markets and workplace cultures (Kansal *et al.*, 2022; Jackson *et al.*, 2023). Such constraints can limit international students' ability to gain relevant experience during their studies, which is critical for developing employability skills and confidence in preparation for graduate roles.

From a higher education institution (HEI) perspective, work-integrated learning (WIL) initiatives, including placements, internships and employer-engaged projects, have been identified as effective mechanisms for enhancing student learning and career readiness (Little and Harvey, 2006; Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough, 2009; Green and Akella, 2024). These experiences enable students to apply theoretical knowledge in real-world contexts, develop professional skills, self-confidence, and build networks that support their transition into employment (Brooks and Youngson, 2016). However, traditional internships are not always accessible to international students due to visa limitations and competitive labour markets.

In response to these challenges, this qualitative study aims to understand the role of one-day micro-internship (hereafter, one-day MI) experiences, co-developed by a UK Business School with industry partners. Specifically, it explores how international students perceive the effectiveness and inclusiveness of a one-day MI programme in enhancing their employability as a valuable short form WIL opportunity. The study addresses two objectives:

RO1: To explore international student experiences of participating in a one-day MI, with a focus on their perceived learning and skill development

RO2: To understand international student perceptions of the value of a one-day MI as an inclusive and accessible form of short-form WIL

Longer-term placements are widely recognised as valuable experiential learning opportunities and dominate the literature (Zegwaard and Rowe, 2019; Divan *et al.*, 2022). This study however contributes to the emerging literature on shorter-form WIL (Kameno, 2023; Green and Akella, 2024; Kramarczuk *et al.*, 2024; George and Lowe, 2025; DiGenova *et al.*, 2026) by exploring how a one-day MI can support the soft skill development and career readiness of international students. Access to work experiences is disproportionate, with international students amongst those groups under-represented (Divan *et al.*, 2022; Dean and Rook, 2023). A one-day micro-internship is explored here as a more inclusive approach, but this remains an under-researched area in the literature requiring more exploration to fully understand the benefits to be gained (DiGenova *et al.*, 2026). This study makes three key contributions: First, it addresses a gap in the literature by examining how one-day MI's can foster employability and developmental outcomes. Second, it offers an international student perspective, showing how one day interventions can support international students access to host country experiences. Third, this study explores whether the one-day MI's can support more equitable participation in WIL by reducing practical and structural barriers without compromising learning quality.

Literature review

Experiential and Work-Integrated Learning

Experiential learning, particularly through direct industry exposure is widely associated with enhancing students' employability and professional development. Drawing on Kolb's Experiential Learning theory, such approaches enable students to apply theoretical knowledge within real-world contexts, facilitating deeper learning through experience and reflection (Kolb, 1984). Work-integrated learning (WIL) is widely recognised as an educational approach that connects academic learning with authentic workplace experiences. While definitions and applications vary across national and institutional contexts, WIL is generally understood as encompassing a range of activities that enable students to apply disciplinary knowledge in practice through engagement with employers, industry partners, or community organisations (Patrick *et al.*, 2009; Zegwaard *et al.*, 2023). Contemporary conceptualisations emphasise collaboration with students, higher education institutions, and external stakeholders to create work-focused learning experiences that combine theory and practice whilst supporting students' professional and employability development (Patrick *et al.*, 2009; Zegwaard *et al.*, 2023).

While earlier literature tended to focus on learning situated within the workplace as the primary site of learning, with knowledge developed through engagement with professional practice (Boud and Solomon, 2001). More recent scholarship has expanded to consider a wider range of employer engaged experiences which extend beyond the traditional models, including shorter durations, non-work placement models and co-curricular forms of learning (Zegwaard *et al.*, 2023; Rook and Dean, 2023; Kay *et al.*, 2019).

Experiential learning through real-world settings has been shown to support the development of key employability skills, enhance student confidence, and provide clarity around career aspirations (Little and Harvey, 2006; Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough, 2009; DiGenova *et al.*, 2026). Engagement with industry further enables students to build professional networks and increase their visibility within the labour market, supporting their transition into employment post-studies (Brooks and Youngson, 2016). In addition to employability outcomes, student participation in authentic work experiences during

their studies, can positively influence their academic attainment (Mendez and Rona, 2010; Tomlinson, 2017; Jones *et al.*, 2017; Divan *et al.*, 2022). Collectively, the research highlights the value of experiential and WIL as a pedagogical approach that supports academic and professional development.

Structural Inequalities

The literature consistently highlights the significant value of extended industrial placements, typically lasting up to 12 months, for enhancing soft skill competencies, developing multiple forms of capital, and strengthening graduate employability (Hughes *et al.*, 2023; Taufik and Kismono, 2026). Despite these well-established benefits, student participation in traditional placements in England remains mixed. Although a large proportion of undergraduate programmes offer placement opportunities, uptake is often low, with fewer than one-quarter of students engaging in such experiences in some institutional and subject contexts (Black *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, access to placements and internships are not equitably distributed across student populations. Certain groups including those with disabilities, students from ethnic minority backgrounds, and those from lower socio-economic groups, are disproportionately under-represented in placement participation (Dean and Rook, 2023; Traynor *et al.*, 2024). These disparities highlight persistent structural inequalities in accessing WIL, which raise important inclusivity concerns of traditional models and their ability to support diverse cohorts.

For international students, these challenges are further compounded by additional barriers. Unfamiliarity with Western recruitment practices, alongside visa restrictions that can deter access to employment opportunities, can make securing year-long placements particularly difficult (Dean and Rook, 2023). This is further exacerbated by the large number of international students enrolled on postgraduate programmes, many of which do not include a formal placement component. As a result, a growing proportion of international students are unable to access traditional WIL pathways, increasing the need for alternative, more flexible opportunities.

Short-Form WIL

HEI's are increasingly offering shorter forms of WIL, including ultra-short formats, as a more accessible and flexible way to support student employability (Kay *et al.* 2019; Kameno, 2023; Green and Akella, 2024). Terms such as 'micro-placement', and 'micro-internship', are generally understood to refer to brief, structured, supervised, project-based learning experiences that provide students with short-term but meaningful exposure to professional practice (Kameno, 2023; George and Lowe, 2025; Green and Akella, 2024). These initiatives are typically developed through collaboration between universities and industry partners, enabling students to engage with real organisational challenges.

These micro work experiences are considerably shorter than traditional placements, ranging from five hours to three weeks (Kameno, 2023; Green and Akella, 2024; Kramarczuk *et al.*, 2024; George and Lowe, 2025; DiGenova *et al.*, 2026). They may be delivered in-person, remotely, or through hybrid formats (Green and Akella, 2024), and can be either paid or voluntary (Kameno, 2023; Kramarczuk *et al.*, 2024; George and Lowe, 2025; DiGenova *et al.*, 2026). As such, they offer a more flexible and scalable approach to WIL. For example, DiGenova *et al.*, (2026) found a one-week work experience lowered barriers to participation, enabling more underrepresented students to engage.

Even within short timeframes, studies indicate that students can develop key skills, self-confidence, workplace insight, professional networks, and enhanced career readiness (Kramarczuk *et al.*, 2024; Green and Akella, 2024; DiGenova *et al.*, 2026). However, none of these studies explicitly examine the perspectives or experiences of international students, highlighting a current lack of research exploring how such experiences are perceived and navigated by international students.

For this study, the one-day MI is positioned as a short-form WIL experience. This involves industry-led challenges delivered on-site at partner organisations, where students engage with a real client to work in groups on an authentic business problem within a professional setting over the course of a single workday.

Theoretical framework

This study is underpinned by three complementary theoretical perspectives: Social Learning Pedagogy (Green and Akiela, 2024), Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984), and Perceived Value Theory (Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). Together, these frameworks inform both the design of the one-day MI and the analytical lens through which students' experiences are interpreted.

Firstly, the one-day MI reflects principles of social learning pedagogy. As outlined by Green and Akiela (2024), micro-internships involve short-term, project-based collaboration with industry partners. In this study, small student groups worked collectively on real-world business challenges, supported by mentors. This structure emphasises collaboration, observation, and shared problem-solving, positioning the MI as a socially constructed learning environment in which knowledge is co-created through interaction.

Secondly, Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1984) provides a framework for understanding how learning unfolds during the one-day MI. Students engage in a concrete experience through participation in an authentic business task on site, followed by reflective observation through group discussion and an end-of-day reflection. This supports abstract conceptualisation, as students consolidate learning beyond the immediate experience. Finally, active experimentation occurs as students apply their learning to future academic, professional, and career contexts.

Thirdly, Perceived Value Theory focuses on how students evaluate the outcomes of participation. Perceived value is understood as a multi-dimensional construct shaped by the interaction between the individual and the experience, influenced by prior expectations and context (Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). The one-day MI was designed as a low-barrier, accessible format that fits easily alongside existing academic commitments. For international students, the experience offers engagement with new cultural and organisational contexts. As such, perceived value is conceptualised here as a dynamic, multi-dimensional evaluation encompassing functional, social, emotional, and longer-term career-related benefits.

Methods

Research Design

This qualitative research adopts a case study design as the interview sample was drawn from students at a single UK Business School. Although case study findings are not intended to be generalisable to wider populations this approach enables the generation of rich, contextualised insights into a specific phenomenon (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In this study, a case study methodology is therefore appropriate for

examining this real-world educational practice, with the aim of developing an in-depth understanding of international students' experiences rather than producing generalisable conclusions.

Sampling

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit nine Business School international students with direct experience of the one-day MI.

The final sample was partly informed by the exploratory qualitative design of this study where the aim was to generate rich, detailed accounts from international students on their lived experience of the one-day MI. The sample size was also partly shaped by the limited total population available. The one-day MI's involve approximately ten students per event, with around three events delivered annually, creating a relatively small and defined participant pool from which to recruit. In addition, the focus specifically on international students further narrowed the sampling frame.

Sample sizes in qualitative research is a widely debated topic, but Crouch and McKenzie (2006) stress that the validity of qualitative inquiry does not depend on large sample sizes, and more recent methodological debates (Elmholdt *et al.*, 2026), question the view of a single threshold interview sample size to meet. Within this context, nine interviews provided access to information-rich cases aligned with the study's purpose.

Data collection methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted enabling both consistency across participants whilst allowing for some flexibility to explore individual experiences in depth. The interview schedule was developed with reference to our three key theoretical frameworks. The Social Learning Pedagogy provided a lens for understanding the collaborative and situated nature of the one-day MI, as such the interview questions explored peer interaction, teamwork, communication, and learning through observation. Kolb's (1984) framework informed questions on how students experienced, reflected on, and applied learning during the one-day MI. Perceived Value Theory guided exploration of participants perceived benefits and outcomes of the experience in relation to accessibility, inclusivity, skill development, confidence, and career readiness. Although interviews were undertaken by two researchers, the common interview schedule helped ensure that comparable topics were explored with all participants.

Data Analysis

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), chosen for its flexibility and suitability for identifying patterns of meaning across participants' experiences. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six phases of: familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up.

The thematic analysis was undertaken using a hybrid inductive–deductive approach. While analysis was informed by concepts reflected in the semi-structured interview schedule (grounded in the theoretical frameworks), coding remained open to patterns of meaning emerging from participants' accounts, allowing both anticipated and unanticipated themes and sub-themes to be developed. To minimise researcher bias during analysis, two researchers independently reviewed the interview transcripts and engaged in iterative discussions to compare interpretations, refine coding decisions, and reach agreement on the final themes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the University Research Ethics Committee, and the study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines.

Findings

This qualitative study draws on interviews conducted with nine international students from one UK Business School, who had participated in a one-day MI. Table 1 provides an overview of the participants' backgrounds, including demographic data and educational characteristics.

Table 1. Participant Demographic and Educational Characteristics

'Insert Table 1 here'

Interview transcripts were analysed following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis approach. Six key themes relating to student experiences of the one-day MI are shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Results of the Thematic Analysis from International Postgraduate Students about the One-Day MI

'Insert Table 2 here'

Theme 1: Authentic Exposure to Real-World Business Practice

All students valued engaging with real organisational challenges, rather than working with hypothetical scenarios. Participants were asked to analyse genuine organisational issues, which allowed students to experience the complexity of real business environments and how organisations operate:

This was great opportunity for me to learn about the company. They have barriers in their business, for example, they should cut their budgets, because they said that the budget will cut from governmental aids. With regard this budget, they asked us to re-engineer their business and offer them some solutions for gaining revenue (Participant B)

They give us proper insights to financial, and sales, marketing perspective and how they do their work, like how they market the clients, how they bring sponsorships...how they go to different countries to get the new markets. (Participant C)

Engaging with a UK organisation exposed international students to approaches and practices that differed from those they had previously encountered in other countries:

Because I'm an international student, my knowledge is from an Asian perspective, but when I go there for a micro-internship, that opened the whole new, different perspective on how things work in Europe and American markets (Participant C)

Of the nine participants, four had no work experience in the UK, while five had undertaken part-time roles during their studies. Several participants also brought substantial professional experience from outside the UK. The sample therefore reflects a diverse range of prior work quantities. Despite these differences, all participants described the one-day MI as a valuable learning experience:

I didn't have any experience in the UK, so this is the first time that I come to the UK and got a job (Participant A)

I work mostly in the warehouses, so this is the first time that I'm getting a chance to work closely into a corporate world (Participant E)

Theme 2: Experiential Learning Bridging Theory and Practice

Participants described the one-day MI as an opportunity to apply analytical frameworks they had been taught in the classroom, translating theoretical ideas into practical solutions:

The micro-internship, you can be able to practise what you've learnt... that you work with an industry live project to test your knowledge and put into practise what you've learnt (Participant D)

What I studied in the SWOT analysis and the IDA model, I applied over there (Participant E)

Participant's felt that this experiential learning created a deeper learning experience compared to traditional classroom activities:

Even now after 10 months I remember that event. But if you ask me what you've learned last term or last semester in one class, maybe I cannot define things. But workplace learning, it can help to remember (Participant B)

Students also emphasised the importance of feedback from industry professionals in shaping their understanding

I led the presentation and everybody spoke and when they asked questions, their questions were tough. We thought they were scrutinising, but at the end of the day we realised that they were eager to know more, learn more from us (Participant D)

This external validation of learning, and the experience of the one-day WIL opportunity, also supported wider benefits:

It's like a ripple effect. One thing is affecting every other thing... The experience actually helped me for the boardroom assessment...it felt like the micro-internship just prepared me, you know, before the boardroom exercise (Participant G)

Theme 3: Development of Professional Competence and Workplace Skills

The experience provided a valuable opportunity to practise communicating in English within a professional setting and to observe the language and interaction styles used in business environments:

English language is not my first language, and it would be very difficult to know what kind of communication I need to do to the recruiters, because business language is totally different. I got to know that, OK, this is the word they use, what sort of communication they used during the day and with the clientele (Participant C)

Given this was a social learning pedagogy, participants reflected on how the collaborative approach developed both team working and interpersonal communication skills:

The internship helps to enhance skills like teamwork, collaborative experiences...some people came from different backgrounds so it was exciting to see that you were able to bring everybody together, bring your idea as a new form of knowledge which people don't

know. So you're building your skills of coordinating people, working with them and sharing your knowledge (Participant D)

Communicating and talking and listening. Sometimes I talk, talk, talk, talk, talk, and I don't listen... there are about five people that are talking at the same time, I need to like, wait for them to finish (Participant G)

The time-constrained nature of the challenge also encouraged students to focus and prioritise tasks effectively, developing time management skills:

It was good opportunity because it was time-bound and we should have put our heads together in in our group and of course when the time is limited, we should use it efficiently (Participant B)

Beyond the development of specific skills, participants also described more transformative personal outcomes arising from the experience, particularly in relation to self-confidence:

The feedback we got was amazing and I felt good and everybody felt good about it. You were able to make an impact in someone's business and you see that you can add value (Participant D)

Everybody was listening, it just made us feel very validated. It made me feel like I'd done something worthwhile. It made me feel seen....That made me feel really good (Participant G)

Theme 4: Accessible and Inclusive Work-Based Learning

Participants outlined how for international students, they face specific barriers in securing work experiences:

Looking for jobs especially because we have some restrictions in the visa, I'm talking international students, so for us it's harder than for the others to get this opportunity (Participant C)

As such, international students valued the accessibility of the one-day format, acknowledging that the simplified application process supported access to industry without the usual recruitment barriers:

I got to know about this internship in an e-mail from one of our professors. They were looking for candidates for this micro-internship. I didn't need to do anything much regarding of filling the forms and everything. So it's very seamless and very quick response from the staff (Participant C)

International students are not very familiar with the culture of here, people find it difficult to get an opportunity here... So this internship experience is a good thing and the process is very much easy, and it is helping out to know things, how actually companies work (Participant H)

The short duration of the experience was seen as a key strength, enabling students to participate alongside demanding academic schedules.

I think a one-day experience was nice because the event was time bound, it help us to work to the point. I think it was efficient and effective holding these kind of events in one day,

because maybe in two or three days that people or even the organisation cannot support this... international Masters students especially are busy (Participant B)

Theme 5: Developing Career Capital and Professional Identity

Participants reported how the experience contributed to the development of longer-term outcomes surrounding professional networking and early career capital:

Sometimes it's difficult, especially for the international students, to get experience and this type of experience helps us to open the doors and share UK experience in our professional profiles and shout out: 'I had contact with a UK company, I worked on a project here!'. I think that it's opened doors on my LinkedIn, I can post about my experience. I can share what I did and I can amplify my networking (Participant A)

So the internship is like a testing ground for you to know how much you've learnt, how much of an impact you can create, and it helps you build the confidence, it helps you rate yourself, to assess yourself, to think 'do I have what it takes', So the internship, it helps you not just plan your skills, it helps you to create a better version of yourself and you practise what you're actually going to become (Participant D)

In addition, participants also described a shift in mindset towards developing professional identities:

Because it was shaping your mind. You're learning, you already have a mindset that, oh, this is what is to be expected. So you are building your mind, you're building your, you know, what it takes now to be in that kind of environment (Participant G)

Theme 6: Enhancing the Design and Delivery of the One-Day MI

Whilst the participants were highly positive about the experience overall, respondents also identified opportunities to further enhance the design and delivery of this initiative. Participants emphasised the importance of better promotion of such opportunities to ensure greater student awareness with more frequent one-day MI experiences throughout the academic year. However, the main contention was the desire for a slightly longer experience:

Only drawback would be it should be little bit longer, because a one-day internship can be hectic, there are a lot of information they're trying to give you. I would say three days. For first day is just introductions and got to know the business, the second day would be very task-oriented things and the last day would be feedback (Participant C)

The one day passed very quickly. If we get a chance of more days, we'll get more knowledge, skills, working in corporate world (Participant I)

Discussion

Firstly, the findings extend our current understanding of short-form WIL by showing that even a one-day intervention can provide exposure to organisational practices and UK workplace culture that many international students may otherwise struggle to access. For some participants, this represented a first encounter with the UK workplace, while for others the one-day MI offered a more strategic level of engagement than previously encountered. This reinforces the importance of perceived value not

simply in functional terms, but as encompassing cultural, social and career-related dimensions (Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007). The value of the one-day MI therefore emerged not only through exposure to business practice, but through access to contexts and opportunities often structurally difficult for international students to obtain. In this way, the study extends employability scholarship by showing that, for international students, one-day MI's can support host-country cultural familiarisation and understanding of workplace practices and expectations.

Secondly, the findings suggest that one-day MI experiences can still generate deep and effective learning. Exposure to real-life business challenges enabled students to apply theoretical knowledge in practice whilst developing professional skills and enhancing self-confidence. The experience also highlighted a reciprocal relationship between theory and practice, whereby students applied classroom learning to the micro-internship, then bringing workplace learning back into subsequent classroom tasks. This feedback loop reported by the international students, suggests that even one-day MI experiences can deepen learning, which others have found with longer-form WIL experiences (Mendez and Rona, 2010; Tomlinson, 2017; Jones *et al.*, 2017; Divan *et al.*, 2022). This finding challenges assumptions within placement literature that deep learning depends on extended periods of immersion.

Thirdly, the findings highlight the one-day MI as a space where experiential and social learning intersect. Consistent with Kolb (1984), students described learning as cyclical, moving from concrete experience through reflection to later application in both academic and professional contexts. Participants' emphasis on peer collaboration, feedback from industry professionals and shared problem-solving aligns strongly with the social learning pedagogy (Green and Akiela, 2024), suggesting that these relational dimensions of the one-day MI experience were another key determinate of its impact and success. Together, these findings suggest that short-form WIL can facilitate socially mediated learning processes that further strengthen reflection, confidence and capability.

Fourthly, the study contributes to debates around equity and access in WIL. The findings reaffirm earlier research showing that structural barriers to work opportunities disproportionately affect certain student groups, particularly international students (Kansal *et al.*, 2022; Jackson *et al.*, 2023). However, the study extends this literature by suggesting that short-form WIL may help students mitigate against these barriers to reduce their negative impact. Participants viewed the one-day format as inherently inclusive given the low-barrier recruitment process, minimal time commitment, and compatibility with study demands. This experience helped overcome challenges associated with limited networks, unfamiliarity with recruitment norms, and visa-related constraints. As such, for the international students, the accessibility of the one-day MI, was another key value.

However, an interesting tension was reported by participants. Participants valued the one-day format precisely because it was manageable and accessible, yet some also felt a greater duration might enable further learning. This highlights a tension between accessibility and depth, suggesting that designing inclusive WIL may involve a trade-off in negotiating competing pedagogical priorities. Whilst accessibility and depth should not be viewed as opposing ends of a continuum, understanding the implications of extending the duration by only a few days, and its impact on reducing its inclusive design, is a factor. This tension points to important considerations for future micro-internship models, including questions of frequency, duration and striking a balance with inclusivity.

Finally, a further contribution of the findings relates to career capital, professional identity and confidence-building. Participants described benefits associated with professional networking, increased visibility in the labour market and using the experience to strengthen their professional profiles, supporting the work of Brooks and Youngson (2016). More significantly, participants described increased confidence through validation from industry professionals and a growing sense of a professional identity. While this aligns with previous studies linking work-integrated learning to self-confidence development (DiGenova *et al.*, 2026), the findings extend this literature by showing that for international students, who may be unfamiliar with UK workplace cultures, professional validation and self-confidence development may carry heightened significance. This suggests the one-day MI experience may also facilitate identity shifts through self-confidence and professional belonging, which is another underexplored area in the short-form WIL learning literature (DiGenova *et al.*, 2026).

Collectively, these findings suggest one-day micro-internships should not be understood as merely shorter placements, but as a distinct pedagogical model through which accessibility, experiential learning, self-confidence and professional identity development are combined to address the needs of a more diverse range of students.

Implications and limitations

These findings have practical implications for the design of WIL in higher education, in suggesting universities need not rely solely on resource-intensive, long-duration placements to deliver effective learning. Carefully designed one-day MI's may provide scalable, lower-cost opportunities that widen participation while supporting authentic industry engagement. In particular, the findings highlight the importance of designing short-form WIL around accessibility, structured reflection, industry feedback and opportunities for progression, rather than treating brevity as inherently limiting.

These findings also have implications for employers, who are a key stakeholder not only in providing the one-day MI's, but in recruiting future graduate talent. One-day MI's offer employers a low-resource mechanism for engaging with emerging talent where organisations can benefit from fresh perspectives and diverse viewpoints on their key business challenges, whilst also identifying potential future recruits.

Whilst the findings are positive, a key limitation of this study is the focus on international student perspectives solely in the UK. Despite this focus, the findings have broader relevance for international higher education contexts. The experiences captured reflect the challenges and needs of students studying abroad and engaging with host-country workplace cultures. As such, the themes identified may resonate across higher education institutions internationally, particularly where enhancing access to authentic industry exposure and supporting international students' transition into local professional environments is a shared priority. Furthermore, these findings may have relevance beyond international students and be applicable to wider student populations. The focus of inclusivity and addressing needs of diverse populations can extend to other student groups who might not be able to access traditional work placements.

A further limitation is that this research captures a snapshot of international student perspectives rather than longer-term outcomes. Future research could examine the longitudinal effects of stackable

micro-internships, compare experiences across different student groups, and further explore how programme design can balance accessibility with WIL engagement.

Conclusions

This study demonstrates that even very short forms of WIL can provide valuable educational and professional benefits for international students. Through authentic exposure to workplace contexts, opportunities to apply theory in practice, and socially mediated learning experiences, the one-day MI supported employability development, confidence-building, professional identity formation and access to UK workplace environments often difficult for international students to obtain.

The study contributes to WIL scholarship by challenging assumptions that effective workplace learning necessarily depends on long-duration placements. Instead, the findings suggest that well-designed, one-day MI's can function as a distinct and valuable pedagogical model in their own right. In particular, the study highlights accessibility as both a practical feature of programme design, as well as a core dimension of educational value, demonstrating how inclusive design can widen participation without diminishing learning quality.

The findings also extend understanding of WIL from an international student perspective, showing that such experiences can support employability skills and career readiness, in addition to cultural familiarisation, professional belonging and confidence-building in navigating unfamiliar labour market contexts. This represents a vital contribution to debates on equitable access to WIL opportunities.

For practice, the findings suggest that HEI's may benefit from embedding short, scalable and low-barrier industry engagements within curricula as a complement to more traditional placements, particularly where widening participation and supporting diverse student groups are priorities. Whilst not a replacement for longer-term internships, one-day MI's may offer an accessible and resource-efficient model for broadening participation in workplace learning.

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