



Co-creating change: community-engaged Work-Integrated Learning for sustainable development in higher education

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Abstract

This paper presents a multi-case study of how community-based Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) can meaningfully embed Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) education into undergraduate curricula. Drawing on four marketing and public relations subjects, we examine how the deliberate alignment of authentic industry and community challenges with specific SDGs creates learning contexts that develop professional competencies alongside sustainability mindsets. Across the four cases, community partners are positioned as co-educators within a three-way partnership model involving students, educators, and industry, enabling a form of knowledge co-creation that neither classroom instruction nor community engagement alone can replicate. Examining the design, delivery and outcomes of each case, we identify three features that account for their effectiveness: the explicit mapping of partner challenges to relevant SDGs, the positioning of partners as co-educators rather than clients, and the achievability of meaningful SDG integration within existing curriculum structures. We argue that these features constitute transferable design principles for educators across disciplines seeking to enhance both graduate employability and societal impact, and we consider the pedagogical and institutional conditions under which they can be sustained and scaled.

Keywords

community-based WIL; community partnerships; co-creation; higher education; sustainability; SDGs; live cases

Introduction

Accomplishing the United Nations SDGs is recognised as a significant global challenge (Aleixo et al., 2020; Dean et al., 2018; Rosenbloom, 2022), requiring collective action across all sectors of society, including education. Universities occupy a distinctive position in this landscape: they shape the values and capabilities of future professionals, maintain relationships with industry and community, and bear institutional responsibility for contributing to sustainable development (Annan-Diab & Molinari, 2017). The question facing educators is not whether to engage with the SDGs but how to do so in ways that are pedagogically meaningful, professionally relevant, and genuinely impactful for the communities involved.

Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) offers a compelling response to that question. WIL creates authentic learning environments in which students engage with real-world challenges while developing the

professional capabilities demanded by employers (Jackson, 2014). Its integration with SDG-focused education addresses the dual imperatives facing contemporary higher education (Cooper et al., 2010), preparing graduates for professional success while cultivating their capacity to contribute to broader societal challenges. This dual purpose is increasingly urgent. More than 60% of Fortune 500 businesses have adopted the SDG framework as a corporate commitment indicator (Song et al., 2022), and students increasingly expect their education to prepare them for engagement with the global sustainability agenda (Filho et al., 2024). Aligning WIL with SDG education positions universities to respond to both expectations simultaneously, producing graduates who are both employable and equipped to act on sustainability challenges in their professional lives.

Despite growing interest in SDG integration within higher education, accounts of how this integration is designed, delivered, and refined in practice remain limited. Much of the existing literature addresses SDG education at the policy or program level rather than offering practitioner-level insight into the pedagogical decisions involved (Lozano et al., 2015; Sterling, 2001). There is a particular scarcity of multi-case accounts that document how educators navigate the design of community-based WIL experiences with explicit SDG alignment across several subjects and disciplinary contexts. Where such alignment is achieved, it is often described in general terms, leaving unanswered the more practical questions of how partner challenges are selected and matched to Goals, how assessment is designed to make the connection meaningful for students, and what makes some partnerships more generative than others.

This paper addresses that gap. We present a multi-case study of SDG integration across four undergraduate marketing and public relations subjects, each structured around community partnerships and live-case pedagogy. Our aim is to illuminate how community-based WIL can create learning experiences that develop professional competencies and sustainability mindsets, while delivering meaningful outcomes for community partners, and from the four cases identify the design features that made this possible. In doing so we write from the standpoint of practitioners analysing our own teaching, a position that is clarified in the methodology. The resulting principles are offered as transferable starting points for educators in other disciplines.

Conceptual Framework and Literature

WIL, Community Partnerships, and SDG Education

WIL has evolved considerably beyond its origins in placement-oriented experiences to encompass a broad range of practice-based, work-based, and authentic learning opportunities (Dean & Campbell, 2020). WIL experiences create situated learning opportunities in which abstract sustainability concepts become tangible through application to authentic workplace and community contexts (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017). This experiential dimension is crucial for developing sustainability literacy (Sterling, 2001), the ability to analyse, understand, and address complex sustainability challenges. WIL experiences focused on sustainability outcomes have been found to foster deeper student engagement with the SDGs by connecting theoretical knowledge to visible community impact (Dean & Campbell, 2020).

Community-based WIL represents a particularly purposeful form of this broader category. Rather than positioning students as passive recipients of industry experience, community-based WIL places them as active contributors to community wellbeing (Rowe et al., 2012). Projects typically address social, environmental, or economic challenges affecting communities. This aligns with what Zegwaard et al. (2021) describe as purposeful WIL learning that contributes to social good alongside professional development. Critically, knowledge in these settings is co-created between students, educators, and community members through democratic engagement that values community expertise alongside academic knowledge (Saltmarsh et al., 2009). This co-creative dimension makes community-based WIL a particularly productive vehicle for SDG education. Rather than positioning the SDGs as abstract global commitments, community-based WIL makes them legible through local, specific, and

actionable challenges, the kind of situated learning that Sterling (2001) identifies as essential for genuine sustainability literacy. This approach also responds directly to the Australian Universities Accord's emphasis on industry engagement and community impact as measures of higher education quality (Department of Education, 2023).

Live Cases and co-creation in Active Learning

Approaches to learning design such as live cases, active learning, and co-creation can embed the SDGs into WIL experiences and enhance student engagement with real-world challenges. Live cases represent a specialised form of community-based WIL in which students address current, unresolved challenges presented by community organisations within structured course timeframes (Brabazon et al., 2019). Unlike traditional case studies, which may be based on past scenarios with known outcomes, live cases involve active community partnerships with ongoing challenges that require real-time solutions. This creates a dynamic learning environment in which students engage with the case as it evolves, responding to genuine uncertainty rather than a curated problem. Live cases operate at the intersection of problem-based learning and community engagement, and provide, according to Culpin and Scott (2012), a structured framework for applying theoretical knowledge to authentic community challenges while maintaining the pedagogical scaffolding of classroom-based learning. Their hybrid nature makes them particularly valuable for students with limited prior exposure to professional contexts (Cummins & Johnson, 2023).

Live cases can be positioned within a framework of informal and incidental learning, assisting student development through direct experience and reflection on the tacit knowledge gained through engagement. They provide real-world experience with reduced professional risk (Bevan & Kipka, 2012), and as students respond to evolving community needs, they develop adaptability and tolerance of ambiguity (Canhoto & Murphy, 2016). Community partners, who often experience resource constraints, benefit from students' innovation and diverse perspectives without the extended time commitment required by internships or placements (Johnson, 2021; Trager, 2020). In this way live cases can strengthen university–community relationships and provide entry points for community engagement across disciplines (Hurd & Stanton, 2023).

Active learning is a pedagogical structure that can contribute to community partnership-based WIL by engaging students in developing their critical thinking, problem-solving, and participation skills. This approach shifts learning from passive reception of information toward a more interactive, student-centred model that views students as co-creators in the learning process rather than merely as an audience (Dollinger & Vanderlelie, 2021). When implemented within community-based WIL, active learning strategies could facilitate knowledge construction through authentic participation in community contexts. This experiential dimension is particularly useful in SDG education as it enables students to engage with sustainability challenges through direct application rather than abstract conceptualisation. Research has found that when students connect with community-identified challenges, they develop deeper conceptual understanding (Rowe et al., 2012).

Co-design, or co-creation, can enhance active learning by emphasising shared responsibility for learning (Bovill, 2020) and the collaborative development of knowledge and solutions between students, educators, and community partners (González-Salamanca et al., 2020). Within WIL contexts, this three-way partnership model (Cooper et al., 2010) establishes reciprocal learning relationships (Winchester-Seeto & Rowe, 2019) in which community expertise is valued alongside academic knowledge. This practice promotes diverse perspectives and a sense of shared responsibility in addressing sustainability challenges. The co-creation approach moves beyond student engagement toward an inclusive partnership based on respect, reciprocity, responsibility, and equal opportunity — principles that are also essential for ethical community-based WIL (Higgins et al., 2019). When community partners are positioned as co-educators, rather than simply clients or service recipients, WIL experiences can develop students' professional skills alongside a deeper understanding of community contexts and sustainability challenges (Paull et al., 2016). This collaborative knowledge

creation can positively affect academic performance (Doyle et al., 2021), boost students' self-development, communication, and self-understanding, and enable them to better navigate the complexities of a rapidly changing world (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2018). Together, these three design approaches (live cases, active learning, and co-creation) provide the pedagogical foundation on which the four cases examined in this paper were built.

Methodology

This paper adopts a multi-case study approach (Yin, 2018) to examine SDG integration across four undergraduate marketing and public relations subjects taught within a single Australian university. Case study methodology is well suited to examining contemporary pedagogical phenomena within their authentic context, particularly where the aim is analytical rather than statistical generalisation, that is, where cases are used to develop and refine transferable principles rather than to establish population-level frequencies (Yin, 2018). The four subjects were selected because each combines community partnership, live-case pedagogy, and explicit SDG alignment. Additionally, they span a range of partner types, disciplinary content, and design choices, allowing cross-case comparison to surface features that recur across contexts.

The analysis draws on the authors' own professional teaching practice. The material examined comprises teaching artefacts we designed (subject outlines, assessment tasks, learning resources, and organisation briefs), our own instructor records, and subject-level information generated through routine institutional quality assurance. These materials arose entirely through the ordinary course of designing and delivering the subjects, no information was collected from students, community partners, or any other individuals for the purpose of this study. Consistent with the Australian National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2023) and our university's research ethics policy, scholarly analysis of documentation arising from one's own professional practice, where no data are gathered from human participants, does not require Human Research Ethics Committee review. This positions the paper within an established tradition of practitioner scholarship in higher education, in which educators subject their own pedagogical decisions and teaching artefacts to systematic analysis (Sachs et al., 2019). Ethical care has nonetheless been exercised throughout, all student work referenced has been de-identified, and community partners are described only in general terms they were content to have made public.

Approximately 400 undergraduate students were enrolled across the four subjects, drawn from the second and third years of marketing and public relations degree programs. Cohorts were mixed in terms of prior WIL experience, reflecting the diversity typical of mid-degree undergraduate enrolment. Each case was documented against a common analytical template capturing the partner and their challenge, the SDGs to which the challenge was mapped and the rationale for that mapping, the design and assessment response, and the outcomes for students and the partner. Cross-case analysis then proceeded by comparing these templates to identify features that recurred across the four settings and appeared to account for their effectiveness. Three such features emerged and are developed in the discussion. The four cases are drawn from a program of community-based WIL that also employs student co-design and live cases (Papakosmas & Hinchcliff, 2025).

Through the establishment of formalised partnerships with local enterprises and community organisations, learning settings were created in which students engage with organisational challenges that have been mapped to specific SDGs. This process ensures that sustainability considerations are embedded within teaching and learning rather than presented as separate or additional components. The live-case design underpinning these examples allows students to experience the complexity and constraints of professional practice while receiving guidance from academic facilitators and industry partners, introducing real-time variables and authentic stakeholder feedback. Co-creation serves as both a pedagogical strategy and a professional-competency development mechanism: students collaborate with community partners to define problems, develop solutions, and evaluate outcomes,

mirroring the professional consultation processes they will encounter in their careers. This collaborative approach aligns with UN recommendations for SDG implementation, which emphasise the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships in addressing complex sustainability challenges (United Nations, 2023).

The Four Cases

Case 1: Sports Marketing and Community Football

This third-year undergraduate sports marketing subject established a strategic partnership with a community football organisation, creating an authentic WIL environment in which students developed professional competencies while addressing real-world challenges. Initial consultations with the community partner revealed two connected challenges: declining sport participation among mature-aged players, and disproportionately low participation rates among female players. These were not hypothetical problems but pressing concerns for an organisation seeking to sustain its membership and broaden its community reach.

The teaching team framed the project around inclusive participation and community wellbeing, mapping the two challenges to SDG #3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG #5 (Gender Equality). The rationale for this mapping was direct and legible to students: a challenge about who plays sport, and who is excluded from it clearly relates about health and gender equity. This clarity was pedagogically significant because it allowed students to see their marketing work beyond a technical exercise as a contribution to identifiable social goals. The mapping shaped both the curriculum and students' conceptualisation of the purpose and broader significance of their work.

The semester-long project culminated in the organisation and management of a Walking Football Tournament, designed for individuals over 55 and including a dedicated female-only competition, a direct, tangible response to both mapped Goals. Throughout the semester, students confronted the authentic demands of the live case: participant recruitment, stakeholder management, and event logistics. They iteratively adjusted promotional strategies in response to feedback from the community partner and early engagement metrics, testing and refining their approach as the event took shape. Collaborative work between students and the partner supported knowledge co-creation, with students' theoretical insights informing practice and the partner's practical expertise reshaping student understanding.

Learning outcomes focused on industry-level skill development, with students designing evidence-based campaigns, executing creative strategies, and evaluating campaign effectiveness. These outcomes were refined through engagement with the industry partner to ensure alignment with contemporary professional competencies. The final assessment, a 3,000-word critical reflection, required students to analyse their decision-making process and identify how their understanding had evolved through practice, consistent with Barthakur et al.'s (2022) finding that self-reflection helps students deepen conceptual understanding and professional competence. Outcomes extended well beyond the classroom. The event attracted significant media attention, providing students with authentic experience in media relations and community engagement, and post-event sponsorship interest from a local bank signalled the community's perception of the initiative's value and durability. Most notably, mapping the work to the SDGs encouraged students to view their activities within a broader societal context, fostering an emerging sense of agency and responsibility.

Case 2: Advertising and Sustainable Local Enterprises

This second-year undergraduate advertising subject was redesigned to integrate theory and practice through WIL. Because advertising exerts a powerful influence on societal norms, the subject offered a natural site for embedding sustainability, but doing so called for more than the addition of sustainability as a topic: it required examining how core disciplinary frameworks could themselves

carry sustainability principles. The teaching team examined how established advertising theory, for example the creative and advertising pyramids, could be reinterpreted so that sustainability considerations were embedded in the construction of persuasive messages rather than appended to them. This led to a decision to establish the SDGs within the subject's core disciplinary content.

Community partnerships were established with two local enterprises whose work aligned with SDG #12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and SDG #13 (Climate Action): a local yoga and sound-healing practitioner, and a sustainable, natural-ingredient teen skincare line founded by a university alumnus. The mapping was grounded in the partners' actual business propositions, responsible production and consumption in the case of the skincare brand, and sustainable wellbeing practices in the case of the practitioner. This meant that students were reasoning about real products and real markets. Initial partner engagement identified distinct challenges: for the practitioner these were increasing awareness of and participation in holistic health practices; for the skincare brand the goal was to educate adolescents about ethical consumption. These challenges were framed, through dialogue between the teaching team, students, and community partners, in terms of audience values, behavioural barriers, and communication strategies.

A particular difficulty for students was the translation of sustainability concepts into compelling creative messages, a genuine professional challenge, since sustainability messaging can easily become worthy but ineffective. Feedback from the community partners, together with workshop adaptations that emphasised the development of audience insight and message testing, helped students address this. Assessment structure was designed to build competency progressively: scaffolded weekly workshop tasks culminated in a final assessment requiring a comprehensive creative strategy, including four advertisements. The subject yielded more than 1,200 advertisements and drew overwhelmingly positive feedback from the community partners. Student motivation was enhanced through a certificate of achievement awarded to the most effective advertisement as judged by the community partners, an approach that drew on gamification principles known to increase engagement and performance (Zhang et al., 2021).

The benefits of engaging local businesses were substantial and mutual. The learning design gave students practical experience that bridged theoretical concepts and professional application, developing the work-ready skills essential for future employment (Jackson & Dean, 2023), and several students were offered work opportunities by community partners at the end of the semester. The community benefited from strengthened relationships between the institution and local enterprises, reinforcing the university's reputation as an engaged partner committed to sustainable development. The case illustrates how SDG alignment, when anchored in a partner's authentic value proposition, can make sustainability integral to disciplinary skill development instead of a competing demand on curriculum time.

Case 3: Public Relations and Co-Created Social Campaigns

This second-year public relations case centred on the co-creation of a WIL experience with a women's health organisation delivering a national-first service for survivors of domestic, family, and sexual violence (DFSV). The partnership was selected for its combination of pedagogical richness and social significance, and the teaching team identified connections to three Goals: SDG #3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG #5 (Gender Equality), and SDG #16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The breadth of this mapping reflected the nature of the challenge itself, which sat at the intersection of health, gender, and justice, and gave students a concrete sense of how a single communication task can advance multiple, interlocking social goals.

Students were briefed on the service's operations, resource constraints, and communication objectives. Two key messages were identified to underpin the strategy: enhancing community understanding of DFSV and building support for the new service designed to address this health and social issue. Students were tasked with publicising the service and creating a social media campaign

to raise awareness. Working closely with the service provider as community partner, students co-created promotional concepts, then determined that Facebook and Instagram were the most appropriate platforms to reach the organisation's target audience. They then applied PR concepts in a professional context to develop content for these two online networks. These outputs formed the basis of assessment tasks which were designed to evaluate their creative and critical thinking as well as the technical skills required of marketing graduates (Daellenbach, 2018). The community partner reviewed and critiqued student submissions and built on the ideas presented to better meet the communication objectives, enacting the knowledge transfer that underpins co-creation.

At the completion of the subject the community partner received useful media materials, social media content, graphics, and background documents for community briefings which they were unable to produce themselves due to resource constraints. This outcome highlighted the practical benefits of WIL partnerships and demonstrated its capacity to address genuine community needs. Internship opportunities secured by two students provided further evidence of this approach in terms of developing industry-relevant capabilities.

Further, this subject demonstrated the distinctive value of positioning a community partner as co-educator. The service provider's domain expertise and understanding of how to communicate about a sensitive and high-stakes issue without causing harm, shaped student learning in ways the teaching team alone could not have supplied. Analysis of student outputs indicated the development of technical PR competencies together with a growing sensitivity to the social contexts that shape professional practice. The case also prompted a subsequent refinement of the subject design to scaffold student engagement with sensitive subject matter more explicitly, underscoring the iterative nature of community-based WIL design.

Case 4: Technology-Enhanced Learning and Health Communication

This case, relating to a second-year public relations subject, explored the integration of technology-enhanced learning within a community-based WIL design. A strategic partnership was established with a national not-for-profit cancer research organisation that was focused on addressing illegal vaping among teenagers. This issue was mapped directly to SDG #3 (Good Health and Well-being), and the partnership provided an authentic context in which students could develop health-communication skills while developing competency in the purposeful use of Generative AI (Gen AI).

The teaching team treated the integration of technology as a deliberate design challenge. Freely available tools such as Chat GPT and Co-Pilot were selected to ensure equitable access, and a scaffolded learning approach was adopted that supported considered use by students without compromising authentic professional practice. As students experimented with Gen AI tools in developing PR materials, they were required to critically evaluate the accuracy, appropriateness, and ethical implications of the outputs, a discipline that mirrors the judgement expected of industry professionals now working with these tools.

Briefings with the community partner and collaborative workshops enabled ongoing dialogue through which campaign materials were continuously refined. A central challenge that mirrored that of a professional setting was to strategically tailor messages for different audience segments. Students confronted the need to adapt tone and content for parents versus teenagers, and to avoid guilt, shame, fear, or shock, elements that research shows detract from long-term behaviour change (Mukattash et al., 2023). The community partner also provided feedback including recommendations around the careful selection of appealing and unique imagery, avoiding subliminal references to vapes or smoking that might reinforce unhealthy behaviour. This input highlighted the opportunity presented in the subject to develop professional judgement that considered community partner needs, media context, and audience impact.

Learning activities were structured to begin with low-stakes, non-assessable tasks before progressing to assessable work, allowing students to incrementally build confidence and skill. Throughout the

session students developed a portfolio of professional PR materials for the community partner that included a media release, feature story, social media calendar and strategy document. Analysis of student feedback and the standard of portfolio elements suggested that students built their professional skills alongside increased confidence in using Gen AI in a professional setting and a more critical understanding of its limitations. The case demonstrates that emerging technologies can be integrated into community-based WIL in ways that support an authentic sustainability challenge, provided their use is appropriately scaffolded and aligned with meaningful communication outcomes.

Cross-Case Analysis

Examined together, the four cases exhibit three recurring features that appear to account for their effectiveness. These are summarised in Table 1 and developed in the discussion that follows.

Table 1. Summary of the four cases and their common design features.

Case	Discipline partner	Challenge and SDG mapping	Design response	Key outcomes
1	Sports marketing; community football organisation.	Declining mature-aged and low female participation → SDG 3, SDG 5	Semester-long live case; Walking Football Tournament (over-55s; female-only competition); 3,000-word critical reflection	Media attention; sponsor interest; students situate work within societal goals
2	Advertising; yoga practitioner & sustainable skincare brand	Awareness of holistic health; adolescent ethical consumption → SDG 12, SDG 13	SDGs embedded in core advertising frameworks; scaffolded workshops; creative strategy + 4 ads	1,200+ ads; strong partner feedback; several students offered work
3	Public Relations; women's health (DFSV) service	Increase DFSV understanding; build support for new service → SDG 3, SDG 5, SDG 16	Co-created social media campaign; partner reviews and builds on student work	Technical PR skills + social sensitivity; usable assets for under-resourced partner
4	Public Relations / technology; not-for-profit cancer research organisation.	Illegal teen vaping → SDG 3	Scaffolded, equitable Gen AI use; audience-tailored health messaging	Increased confidence and critical judgement in professional Gen AI use

The table makes visible what the individual cases share beneath their surface differences. Although the disciplines, partners, and technologies vary, the same three design steps recur: a partner challenge is mapped explicitly to one or more relevant SDGs; the partner is drawn into the teaching as a co-educator whose expertise shapes learning; and the whole is delivered within the structure of a current subject, using existing assessment architecture without the need for a unique or resource-intensive redesign.

Discussion

The integration of the SDGs into curriculum through community-based WIL, as demonstrated across these four marketing and public relations cases, reveals several implications for higher education pedagogy. Three themes emerged from the analysis, each supported by all four cases.

Explicit SDG mapping creates authentic learning contexts

The first and most consistent feature was the deliberate, explicit mapping of community-partner challenges to specific SDGs. In each case, the mapping was a design decision that shaped how students understood the purpose of their work. Framing football participation as a matter of health and gender equity (Case 1), or teen skincare marketing as a question of responsible consumption (Case 2), gave students a line of sight from a concrete professional task to an identifiable social goal. This explicit connection appears to be what distinguishes meaningful SDG integration from tokenistic reference. It aligns with research showing that effective education for sustainable development requires a transformation of educational paradigms beyond the mere addition of sustainability content (Sterling, 2001). It also suggests that the act of mapping, in which the discipline-to-Goal connection becomes visible and requires students to work through it, is pedagogically consequential. Notably, the mapping was most significant where it was anchored in the partner's authentic proposition, not externally imposed, which suggests that the selection of community partner is itself a curriculum decision.

Community partners as co-educators

The second theme was the effectiveness of community partners functioning as co-educators instead of passive clients. Across all four cases, partners contributed domain expertise that enriched the learning experience beyond classroom instruction alone. This was clearest in Case 3, where the health service's understanding of how to communicate responsibly about domestic and family violence shaped student learning in ways the teaching team could not have supplied unaided. Positioning partners in this manner represents a meaningful shift in partnership design, with implications for how partners are briefed, supported, and recognised (Higgins et al., 2019; Paull et al., 2016). It also changes the reciprocity of the relationship: partners were not merely recipients of student output but active contributors to it, and in some instances (notably Cases 2 and 3) the value flowed in both directions, with students producing assets that under-resourced organisations could not have developed independently. This mutuality is central to the ethical foundation of community-based WIL (Saltmarsh et al., 2009) and appears to be a condition of its durability.

Feasibility within existing curriculum structures

The third theme is perhaps the most practically significant for educators considering this approach: in every case, meaningful SDG integration was achieved within existing curriculum structures. None of the four subjects required wholesale redesign, additional teaching resources, or a departure from standard assessment architecture. SDG alignment was accomplished through the deliberate selection of community partners whose challenges mapped to relevant Goals, combined with assessment tasks that required students to make that connection explicit. The creative strategy in the advertising case and the event-management project in the sports marketing case both directed students to apply discipline-specific knowledge while addressing sustainability challenges, demonstrating that authentic assessment can serve several educational objectives simultaneously. This feasibility is significant because it lowers the barrier to adoption: educators do not need to wait for institutional transformation or dedicated sustainability programs to begin integrating the SDGs meaningfully into their teaching.

These three themes suggest that the integration of SDGs into community-based WIL is not narrowly context-dependent but instead reflects transferable principles that are applicable across disciplines. The consistency of these elements across four cases spanning different practice disciplines, partner types, and technologies strengthens confidence that they are design features rather than artefacts of a single fortunate context.

Implications

Pedagogical implications

For curriculum designers, these cases suggest several practical entry points. SDG alignment does not require wholesale curriculum redesign, it can be achieved through the deliberate selection of community partners whose challenges map to relevant Goals, combined with assessment tasks that require students to make that connection explicit. The alignment of assessment design with both industry standards and SDG principles demonstrates the feasibility of authentic assessment tasks that address multiple educational objectives at once. This has implications for how educators conceptualise learning outcomes and evaluation across disciplines. For WIL practitioners specifically, the positioning of community partners as co-educators rather than clients represents a meaningful shift that changes how partnerships should be briefed, supported, and recognised.

Institutional implications

At the institutional level, these cases highlight the potential of strategically aligned community partnerships to advance several institutional priorities simultaneously. The integration of teaching, community engagement, and sustainability created synergies that enhanced the impact of each component; this aligns with calls for more holistic approaches to university operations that break down traditional silos between teaching, research, and service (Trencher et al., 2014). By framing disciplinary learning within SDG contexts, universities can develop graduates with both professional competencies and sustainability mindsets, addressing the call for higher education to move beyond knowledge transmission toward transformative learning that prepares graduates to address complex sustainability challenges (Lozano et al., 2015). The specific mapping of industry challenges to Goals in these cases, for example, connecting advertising to responsible consumption (SDG #12) and climate action (SDG #13), and sports marketing to health and wellbeing (SDG #3) and gender equality (SDG #5), provides concrete examples of how seemingly disparate disciplinary content can be aligned with sustainability frameworks. For institutions, the cases also highlight the value of structural conditions that allow successful initiatives to be sustained and shared. Workload recognition for example could support ongoing community engagement, partnership databases, and cross-disciplinary communities of practice that prevent effective initiatives from remaining isolated in individual subjects.

Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations in this research should be acknowledged. The four cases are drawn from a single institution and two different disciplines, namely marketing and public relations, which constrains the breadth of the findings. Additionally, the analysis is based on the authors' examination of their own teaching artefacts rather than on independently collected accounts from students or community partners, whose perspectives would add valuable dimensions. The long-term impact of these learning experiences on students' sustainability mindsets and professional practice lies beyond the scope of this analysis and would require longitudinal study.

These limitations notwithstanding, it is suggested that the core principles identified, namely explicit SDG mapping, community partners as co-educators, and feasibility within existing curriculum structures, are broadly adaptable. Some contextual factors will influence transferability. Disciplines with less established industry-partnership infrastructure may require greater institutional investment to initiate community relationships of the kind described here. Subjects with larger cohorts or more constrained contact hours may need to adapt the co-creation model to fit available resources. Additionally, institutional cultures that do not yet recognise community-engaged teaching as a legitimate scholarly contribution may present barriers to sustained implementation. These are not reasons to avoid the approach but rather are considerations that educators in different contexts could factor into their planning. Future research could usefully examine the transferability of these

principles across different disciplinary and institutional contexts, longitudinally track graduates' application of sustainability principles in professional practice, and investigate the institutional factors that enable or constrain the scaling of community-based WIL initiatives, including workload recognition, partner support structures, and curriculum governance.

Conclusion

This multi-case study demonstrates how community-based WIL can be used to embed SDG education meaningfully within undergraduate curricula. Across four marketing and public relations cases, students' engagement with sustainability-focused community partners developed their professional competencies alongside a deeper understanding of the Goals, while delivering tangible value to the partner organisations involved. Three design features recurred across the cases and appear to account for their effectiveness, the explicit mapping of partner challenges to relevant SDGs, the positioning of partners as co-educators, and the achievability of meaningful integration within existing curriculum structures. Together these constitute transferable principles for educators across disciplines. The integration of the SDGs into curriculum through community-based WIL represents a practical and achievable approach for higher education institutions seeking to enhance both the relevance and the impact of their educational offerings. As institutions continue to explore how they can contribute to global sustainability challenges, community-based WIL offers a concrete and adaptable pathway for meaningful contribution.

Statement on the use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors used a generative AI tool (Claude, Anthropic) to assist with editing and improving the clarity and flow of this manuscript. All ideas, analysis, reflections, and intellectual content were originated and developed by the authors. The AI tool was not used to generate content, analyse data, or produce conclusions. The authors take full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work as published.

Contributions against CReDIT

Both authors conceptualised the study, then collected and analysed the data and drafted the manuscript. Both authors also critically reviewed and revised the manuscript and approved the final version.

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