

Experiential Learning and Life Skills Development in Higher Education: A Practice-Based Framework for Developing Self-Directed Learners in VUCA Environments

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary higher education is expected to prepare learners for far more than disciplinary examinations. Graduates increasingly enter professional and social environments characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA), in which previously learned procedures are frequently insufficient for unfamiliar problems (Lemoine et al., 2017; Rouvrais et al., 2018). Employer surveys similarly indicate that analytical thinking, resilience, flexibility and collaborative capability are among the competencies most in demand, and that a substantial proportion of currently required skills are expected to change within a five-year horizon (World Economic Forum, 2025). In such environments learners require transferable life skills, including critical thinking, decision-making, communication, collaboration, self-management, emotional coping, adaptability and the capacity to reflect on experience (OECD, 2018; World Health Organization, 1997). Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), particularly the model articulated by Kolb (1984, 2015), provides a useful pedagogical lens because it situates experience, reflection, conceptual understanding and experimentation within an iterative learning process.

This paper develops a practice-based framework for understanding how experiential learning can create opportunities for life-skills development in undergraduate education. It analyses two educational cases: a business simulation and an overseas experiential-learning programme. Rather than treating participation in an activity as proof of skill development, the paper distinguishes among exposure to a skill, opportunities to practise the skill, perceived learning, observed behaviour and demonstrated competency. This distinction responds directly to the need for stronger methodological alignment between claims and evidence (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006; Shadish et al., 2002).

The paper expands the conceptual relationship between the four ELT processes Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation and Active Experimentation and six life-skill domains. It further explains the role of facilitation, structured reflection, feedback, assessment and transfer (Fanning & Gaba, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Perkins & Salomon, 1992). The previously reported improvement of more than 15% in assessment scores is retained only as a descriptive observation unless cohort, assessment-equivalence and statistical information are supplied. Similarly, student reports from the overseas programme are interpreted as perceptions rather than causal evidence (Podsakoff et al., 2003). The paper concludes with an expanded framework and a proposed empirical design using validated instruments, pre-post measurement, authentic performance tasks, qualitative evidence and delayed follow-up (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Gulikers et al., 2004).

Keywords: Experiential Learning Theory; life skills; higher education; Kolb; business simulation; overseas experiential learning; self-directed learning; VUCA; reflection; transfer; facilitation

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary higher education is increasingly expected to prepare learners not only to acquire disciplinary knowledge but also to use that knowledge flexibly in unfamiliar, changing and complex situations. Traditional academic instruction remains essential for developing conceptual understanding; however, knowledge

acquisition alone does not guarantee that students can apply theoretical ideas effectively when confronted with incomplete information, competing perspectives or unpredictable consequences (Ambrose et al., 2010; Perkins & Salomon, 1992). Experiential learning is particularly relevant to this challenge because it places learners in situations where knowledge must be connected with action, reflection and problem-solving. Morris (2020) argues that meaningful experiential learning involves active participation, contextually situated knowledge, engagement with real-world problems and critical reflection, and his systematic review further suggests that critical reflection plays an important mediating role between experience and meaningful learning. This position extends a much older pedagogical claim that education must be grounded in experience that is continuous with, and interactive within, the learner's wider situation (Dewey, 1938).

This challenge becomes more significant in the context of a **volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) world**. The VUCA framework has increasingly been applied to higher education to describe environments shaped by rapid technological change, economic and social disruption, interconnected problems and uncertainty about future conditions. Lemoine et al. (2017) identify the changing technological, economic and social environment as a significant challenge for educational institutions and emphasise the need for graduates who can respond to shifting circumstances. More recent labour-market evidence similarly indicates that adaptability, creative problem-solving, resilience and lifelong learning are becoming central to employability as the demand profile of work changes (World Economic Forum, 2025).

Within such environments, graduates increasingly require capabilities that extend beyond subject-specific knowledge. Rouvrais et al. (2018), for example, emphasise the importance of judgement and decision-making skills in preparing learners for unpredictable professional and personal environments, and identify experiential learning situations as a means of enriching transversal decision-making competencies within higher education. Comparable arguments have been advanced in engineering education more broadly, where reflection, creativity, leadership, curiosity and decision-making are treated as core graduate capabilities for environments characterised by rapid technological and organisational change (Desai et al., 2018).

In this context, **life skills** provide a useful framework for understanding the transferable capabilities that students require for effective academic, personal and professional functioning. The World Health Organization (1997) defines life skills as the abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life, and subsequent guidance has retained this functional emphasis (World Health Organization, 2020). Life skills should not be regarded as qualities entirely separate from disciplinary learning. Rather, they are demonstrated through the way learners communicate, collaborate, make decisions, solve problems, manage themselves, respond to challenges and adapt their behaviour to changing circumstances (OECD, 2018). Completing a group project can require communication, collaboration and conflict management; solving an unfamiliar academic problem can require critical thinking and decision-making (Facione, 1990); responding constructively to feedback can require emotional self-management (Salovey & Mayer, 1990); and planning independent learning requires self-regulation and responsibility (Zimmerman, 2002).

The relationship between experiential learning and life skills is therefore particularly important. Skills such as communication, collaboration, decision-making and adaptability are developed through opportunities to practise them in meaningful contexts (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). A lecture can explain the principles of negotiation, but a structured group activity can require students to negotiate competing interests. Similarly, a classroom discussion may introduce decision-making under uncertainty, whereas a simulation can place students in a situation where they must make decisions with incomplete information and subsequently examine the consequences of those decisions (Faria et al., 2009; Granlund, 2008). The educational value of experiential learning consequently lies not simply in **doing**, but in connecting action with reflection, conceptual understanding, feedback and subsequent application (Boud et al., 1985; Moon, 2004).

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory provides an important conceptual foundation for understanding this process. The theory conceptualises learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, and represents it as a cycle involving **Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation and Active Experimentation** (Kolb, 1984, 2015; Kolb et al., 2001). The cycle emphasises that learning develops through the transformation of experience rather than through

experience alone. Contemporary work continues to use Kolb's framework while placing greater emphasis on learning spaces, reflection and the role of the educator (Kolb & Kolb, 2017). Morris (2020) similarly proposes that experiential learning should involve contextually rich experience, critical reflection, context-specific conceptualisation and pragmatic experimentation.

The relevance of experiential learning to higher education has also been demonstrated across different pedagogical contexts. Phan (2024) proposes a framework integrating experiential learning through activities such as guest-speaker engagement, company visits and project-based learning, grounded in Kolb's experiential learning theory and Bandura's social learning theory, with particular attention to critical thinking, teamwork and communication. O'Flynn et al. (2023), drawing on interviews with eight academic managers and six focus groups with learners in an entrepreneurial university, examined the design, delivery and assessment of experiential learning and illustrate that it is a complex intervention capable of generating both direct and indirect effects at individual and institutional levels.

However, experiential learning should not be treated as automatically producing life-skills development. Participation in an activity does not necessarily demonstrate that a learner has developed a transferable competency. A student may participate actively in a simulation without critically analysing the reasons behind a decision, just as participation in an international or intercultural experience does not automatically demonstrate improved adaptability or communication (Anderson et al., 2006; Deardorff, 2006). The quality of learning depends on the design of the experience and on what happens before, during and after participation. Preparation, facilitation, reflection, feedback, conceptual integration and opportunities for subsequent application are therefore important components of an effective experiential-learning environment (Eyler, 2009; Fanning & Gaba, 2007). Recent research on experiential learning in higher education likewise emphasises the need for deliberate integration of experiential activities with academic and professional learning rather than treating experience as an isolated pedagogical activity (O'Flynn et al., 2023; Phan, 2024).

This distinction is particularly important for research on **life-skills development**. Claims concerning improved communication, adaptability, critical thinking, leadership or decision-making should be distinguished from students' perceptions of learning or simple participation in experiential activities. Evidence of exposure to an experience, perceived learning, observed behavioural change and demonstrated competency represent different levels of evidence, a distinction long recognised in evaluation frameworks that separate reaction, learning, behaviour and results (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). Consequently, experiential-learning research needs to define the intended competencies clearly and identify appropriate ways of examining whether students can apply those competencies beyond the original learning situation (Baldwin & Ford, 1988).

The present paper therefore adopts a **cautious practice-based perspective**. It does not argue that experiential learning automatically causes life-skills development. Instead, it proposes that well-designed experiential learning can create meaningful opportunities for students to practise and develop transferable capabilities when experience is intentionally connected with reflection, facilitation, conceptualisation, feedback, application and transfer. This position is consistent with literature emphasising critical reflection, contextualised experience and purposeful design as important elements of experiential learning (Moon, 2004; Morris, 2020; Schön, 1983).

The paper examines this proposition through two complementary experiential-learning contexts: a **business simulation** and an **overseas experiential-learning programme**. The business simulation represents a relatively structured environment in which students can make decisions, receive feedback, reflect on consequences and experiment with alternative strategies (Sitzmann, 2011). The overseas programme represents a more open-ended environment in which students encounter unfamiliar social, cultural and institutional contexts and may need to adapt their communication and behaviour (Deardorff, 2006). Examining these two contexts together allows the paper to consider how different forms of experiential learning may provide opportunities for practising different dimensions of life skills.

Accordingly, the central argument of the paper is that the educational potential of experiential learning lies not merely in exposure to real or simulated experience, but in the **quality of the learning cycle surrounding that experience**. The relationship can be represented conceptually as:

Experience → Reflection → Facilitation → Conceptualisation → Feedback → Application → Transfer

This sequence should not be interpreted as a causal equation. Rather, it represents a pedagogical design principle through which experiential activities can be intentionally connected to transferable learning, consistent with the principle of constructive alignment between intended outcomes, learning activities and assessment (Biggs, 1996). In VUCA environments, where graduates may encounter situations that cannot be fully anticipated or resolved through fixed procedures, such an approach may provide valuable opportunities for practising adaptability, communication, decision-making, collaboration and self-management. The paper therefore contributes to the discussion of experiential learning by examining how different experiential contexts can support the **practice, reflection and potential transfer of life skills**, while maintaining an appropriate distinction between educational opportunity and demonstrated learning outcome.

Problem Statement

A recurring problem in the experiential-learning literature and in practice is the tendency to move quickly from an activity description to a claim of skill development. When students participate in a simulation, travel programme, field project or group activity, it is tempting to conclude that they have developed leadership, adaptability, communication or critical thinking. However, participation establishes exposure to an experience, not mastery of a competency (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). Similarly, a student's statement that confidence increased is valuable evidence of perceived learning, but it is not identical to demonstrated improvement on an objective measure; self-report data collected at a single point and from a single source are also susceptible to common-method and expectancy effects (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Reviewer feedback on the earlier manuscript identified this evidence problem. In particular, the reported assessment improvement of more than 15% lacked information about cohort size, assessment equivalence, baseline differences, reliability, statistical significance and confounding variables — precisely the threats to internal validity that non-equivalent group comparisons are known to carry (Shadish et al., 2002). The overseas case relied mainly on observations and student feedback. The present version addresses this problem by making the epistemic status of each claim explicit and by providing a framework for stronger future evaluation.

Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to develop a detailed conceptual and practice-based account of how experiential learning can support life-skills practice in undergraduate education. The paper uses two cases to illustrate different experiential environments and then connects these cases to a structured life-skills framework.

Objectives

- To clarify the meaning and dimensions of life skills relevant to higher education.
- To explain Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory in relation to higher-order and transferable learning.
- To examine how the four stages of ELT can create opportunities for life-skills practice.
- To analyse business simulation and overseas experiential learning as two different experiential contexts.
- To distinguish student participation, perceived learning, observed behaviour and demonstrated competency.
- To explain how facilitation, reflection, feedback and transfer strengthen experiential learning.
- To propose an expanded framework for designing and evaluating life-skills development through experiential learning.
- To identify methodological requirements for future empirical research.

Conceptualising Life Skills

Life skills can be understood as transferable competencies that enable individuals to respond constructively to the demands and challenges of everyday life (World Health Organization, 1997). The concept is broad, and different organisations and researchers group skills differently; competence frameworks developed for education systems, for example, organise similar capabilities around the creation of new value, the reconciliation of tensions and dilemmas, and the taking of responsibility (OECD, 2018). For this paper, life skills are operationalised as competencies that can be observed or meaningfully discussed in relation to learners' cognitive processes, interactions with others, self-management, emotional responses and adaptation to change.

The operational definition is important for research. If life skills are treated as an unlimited list of desirable personal qualities, it becomes difficult to decide what should be taught, what should be observed and what should be measured. Prevention and life-skills training programmes in other educational settings have shown that specifying target behaviours is a precondition for both instruction and evaluation (Botvin et al., 1998). A clearer definition allows an educator to identify the expected behaviour, create an activity that provides practice, develop an assessment criterion and collect evidence of change.

Cognitive Skills

Cognitive life skills include problem-solving, critical thinking and decision-making. Problem-solving involves recognising a problem, defining it accurately, identifying relevant information, generating alternatives, evaluating possible solutions and selecting an appropriate response. Critical thinking involves questioning assumptions, examining evidence, distinguishing facts from interpretations and considering alternative explanations; expert consensus definitions additionally stress the dispositional element, describing the ideal critical thinker as habitually inquisitive, well-informed and willing to reconsider (Facione, 1990). Decision-making requires the learner to select an action from competing possibilities, often under conditions of incomplete information — a capability that Rouvrais et al. (2018) argue must be deliberately cultivated rather than assumed.

Experiential learning can make these processes visible. In a simulation, students cannot remain at the level of describing a decision-making theory; they must actually choose an action. The facilitator can then ask what information was used, what assumptions were made, which alternatives were rejected and what evidence would have changed the decision. Such questioning moves students from activity participation toward metacognitive awareness (Ambrose et al., 2010; Zimmerman, 2002).

Communication Skills

Communication is more than speaking clearly. Effective communication includes active listening, questioning, explaining, presenting, negotiation and adapting a message to an audience. In experiential environments, communication is often consequential: unclear instructions can produce errors, poor listening can create disagreement, and ineffective negotiation can prevent a group from reaching a decision. Phan (2024) accordingly positions communication alongside critical thinking and teamwork as a primary target of experiential design in business and professional education.

A strong experiential activity therefore creates multiple communication roles. Students may present a proposal, listen to another group, negotiate resources, defend a decision or explain a failure. Reflection can then examine not only what was said but how communication affected the outcome. This makes communication an assessable behaviour rather than a general personal attribute (Gulikers et al., 2004).

Interpersonal Skills

Interpersonal skills include collaboration, empathy, cooperation and conflict management. These skills become especially visible when individuals with different expectations must work toward a shared outcome. Experiential learning can expose students to disagreement and competing viewpoints in a relatively safe educational environment; the willingness of team members to speak up, admit error and raise concerns depends substantially on whether the group is experienced as psychologically safe (Edmondson, 1999). The learning opportunity arises

when students are encouraged to understand why disagreement occurred and how different responses changed the group process.

Empathy is also relevant. Students may learn that the same event is interpreted differently by different participants. Structured reflection can ask learners to consider the perspective of another team member, client, community or cultural group. This is particularly important in overseas experiential learning, where cultural assumptions may become visible and where perspective-taking is treated as a component of intercultural competence rather than an incidental by-product of travel (Deardorff, 2006).

Self-Management

Self-management refers to the learner's capacity to plan, monitor and regulate personal action. It includes goal setting, time management, responsibility, self-monitoring and persistence — the cyclical forethought, performance and self-reflection phases described in models of self-regulated learning (Zimmerman, 2002). Experiential tasks often involve deadlines, incomplete instructions and competing priorities, thereby requiring students to organise their own behaviour, and such autonomy-supportive conditions are associated with more self-determined forms of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Self-management becomes stronger when students are asked to set goals before an activity and evaluate performance afterward. For example, a learner may set a goal to contribute at least two evidence-based ideas during a group decision, monitor whether that occurred and identify what prevented effective participation. This process converts an abstract expectation into a self-regulatory cycle and supports the gradual assumption of responsibility for one's own learning that characterises self-directed learners (Knowles, 1975).

Emotional Coping

Emotional coping concerns how learners respond to stress, uncertainty, disappointment and challenging interpersonal situations. The capacity to perceive, appraise and regulate emotion in oneself and others has been described as a distinct set of abilities relevant to adaptive functioning (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Experiential activities can generate emotional responses because students may experience failure, time pressure, unfamiliar environments or disagreement. These responses should not be treated merely as obstacles; with appropriate facilitation, they can become material for reflective learning, since attending to and working with feelings is an explicit element of the reflective process (Boud et al., 1985).

The educational objective is not to eliminate all discomfort. Rather, students can learn to recognise emotional reactions, pause before responding, seek information, communicate concerns and choose constructive strategies. Beliefs about one's capability to organise and execute action in demanding situations influence both persistence and the level of challenge a learner will accept (Bandura, 1997). Ethical facilitation is therefore important, because challenging experiences should remain psychologically and academically appropriate (Edmondson, 1999).

Adaptability

Adaptability is the capacity to modify behaviour or strategy when circumstances change. It is particularly relevant to VUCA environments because a strategy that worked previously may become ineffective (Lemoine et al., 2017), and employers increasingly identify flexibility and agility among the core skills required as work is reshaped (World Economic Forum, 2025). Experiential activities can deliberately introduce changing conditions, such as new information, altered customer preferences, limited resources or unexpected constraints; Rouvrais et al. (2018) describe precisely this approach, categorising decision-oriented learning situations according to the type of VUCA perturbation they introduce.

Adaptability should be assessed through behaviour rather than assumed from participation. Evidence may include whether students recognise that an original strategy is no longer appropriate, generate alternatives, justify a revised plan and evaluate the result. Reflection is critical because students need to understand why adaptation was necessary rather than simply reacting to change (Schön, 1983).

Table 1 Life-Skill Domains, Observable Indicators and Suitable Experiential Contexts

Life-skill domain	Core competencies	What an educator can observe	Suitable experiential context
Cognitive	Problem-solving, critical thinking, decision-making (Facione, 1990)	Quality of reasoning, evidence use, alternatives considered	Simulation, case, problem-based task
Communication	Listening, presentation, questioning, negotiation	Clarity, turn-taking, questioning, negotiation, behaviour	Group project, simulation, field/overseas activity
Interpersonal	Collaboration, empathy, conflict management (Edmondson, 1999)	Participation, perspective-taking, conflict response	Team task, community project
Self-management	Goal setting, planning, monitoring, responsibility (Zimmerman, 2002)	Preparation, time use, task completion, self-monitoring	Independent project, field task
Emotional coping	Stress management, uncertainty response (Salovey & Mayer, 1990)	Constructive response to pressure or failure	Challenging/novel activity
Adaptability	Strategy revision, flexibility, learning from mistakes	Response to changed conditions and feedback	Changing simulation, unfamiliar context

Experiential Learning Theory

Kolb (1984) conceptualises learning as the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience, drawing on the intellectual traditions of Dewey, Lewin and Piaget. The theory is valuable for this paper because it prevents a narrow view of learning as the passive acquisition of information. The learner encounters something, reflects on it, develops an interpretation or concept, tests that understanding through action and then encounters another experience (Kolb, 2015).

Concrete Experience (CE)

Concrete Experience is the learner's direct involvement in an activity, event or problem. The experience should be sufficiently meaningful to require attention and action. In a business simulation, students may have to choose pricing, marketing, production or resource strategies (Faria et al., 2009). In an overseas programme, students may interact with unfamiliar institutions, communities, professional settings or cultural practices.

A useful concrete experience has a clear learning purpose, appropriate challenge and consequences that students can examine. Dewey (1938) cautioned that not all experience is educative: an experience is miseducative when it arrests or distorts further growth. If an activity is completely predictable, it may provide limited opportunity for decision-making; if it is excessively confusing, students may focus on coping rather than learning. Design therefore requires a balance between challenge and support (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Reflective Observation (RO)

Reflective Observation involves deliberately examining the experience. Reflection asks learners to move beyond describing events toward analysing them (Boud et al., 1985; Gibbs, 1988). Useful questions include: What happened? What did I expect? What actually happened? What decision did I make? What information did I ignore? How did other people interpret the situation? What worked? What failed? What would I do differently?

Reflection is a central mechanism in life-skills development because many transferable competencies involve self-awareness. Schön (1983) distinguishes reflection-in-action, which occurs while the situation is unfolding, from reflection-on-action, which occurs afterwards; both are relevant to experiential coursework. A learner who simply repeats an action may repeat the same mistake, whereas a learner who analyses the action can identify a pattern and consider an alternative. Where reflection also involves examining the assumptions underlying an interpretation, it may support more fundamental changes in perspective (Mezirow, 1991).

Abstract Conceptualisation (AC)

Abstract Conceptualisation occurs when learners connect experience and reflection with concepts, theories, principles or models. This stage protects experiential learning from becoming an isolated activity (Morris, 2020). Students may discover that a simulation decision relates to risk management, strategy, leadership or opportunity cost. In an overseas context, students may connect communication difficulties with intercultural communication concepts (Deardorff, 2006).

Conceptualisation also enables transfer. Learners who grasp the underlying principle of an experience are better positioned to recognise structurally similar situations elsewhere, a process that supports the deliberate abstraction associated with high-road transfer (Perkins & Salomon, 1992). The goal is therefore not merely to remember what happened, but to understand what the experience means.

Active Experimentation (AE)

Active Experimentation occurs when learners use their developing understanding to test a revised action. In a simulation, this may happen in the next round. In a project, it may involve changing a communication strategy. In an overseas programme, it may involve applying a lesson from an earlier interaction to a later situation.

This stage is particularly important for adaptability and self-directed learning. Students learn that knowledge is provisional and can be improved through feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Experimentation also creates a new concrete experience, so the cycle begins again (Kolb, 2015).

The Experiential Learning Cycle

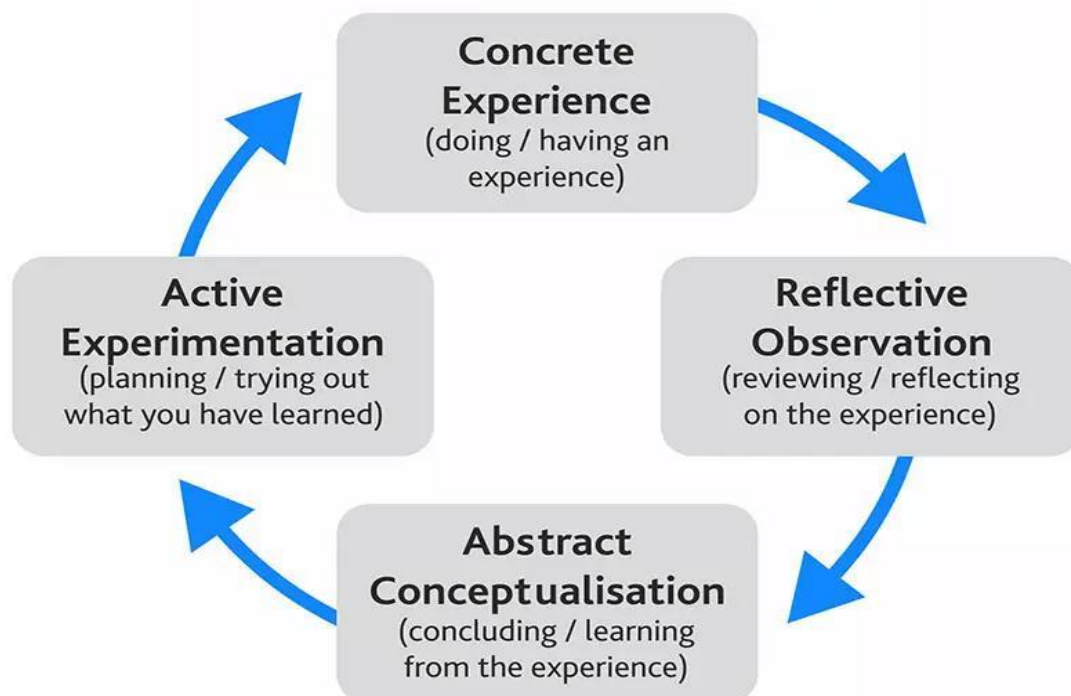


Figure 1. Retained original ELT learning-cycle diagram (expanded for clarity)

ELT as an Iterative Rather than Linear Process

Although the four stages are commonly presented in a circular sequence, real learning does not always proceed in a neat order. A student may form a concept before fully reflecting, return to an earlier interpretation after receiving feedback, or experiment several times before understanding why an outcome occurred. Critics of the standard representation have argued that the familiar circular diagram understates the complexity of the

underlying theory and can encourage mechanical application (Bergsteiner et al., 2010), and historical reviews similarly note that the cycle has often been adopted more as an instructional template than as a theory of learning (Seaman et al., 2017). The cycle should therefore be used as a flexible pedagogical structure rather than a rigid checklist (Morris, 2020).

For life-skills development, iteration is especially important. Communication, decision-making and adaptability rarely become stable after one practice opportunity. Repeated cycles allow learners to compare actions across situations, identify patterns and refine strategies (Ambrose et al., 2010).

Linking Experiential Learning with Life Skills

The relationship between ELT and life skills can be understood as a progression from opportunity to practice to evidence. Concrete experience creates a situation in which a skill is needed. Reflection creates awareness of how the skill was used. Conceptualisation helps explain the behaviour. Active experimentation allows the learner to try a revised approach. A new experience then provides an opportunity to see whether the revised approach works in a different or more difficult context (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Perkins & Salomon, 1992).

Table 2 Correspondence Between ELT Stages, Life-Skill Opportunities and Possible Evidence

ELT stage	Learning process	Life-skill opportunities	Possible evidence
Concrete Experience	Learner acts in a meaningful situation	Communication, collaboration, decision-making	Participation, task performance
Reflective Observation	Learner analyses action and outcome	Self-awareness, self-evaluation, emotional coping	Reflective journal, debriefing
Abstract Conceptualisation	Learner links experience with theory	Critical thinking, problem-solving	Written explanation, concept map
Active Experimentation	Learner tests a revised strategy	Decision-making, adaptability	Second-round performance
New Experience	Learner transfers learning	Self-directed learning, transfer	Performance in new context

Note. Stage definitions adapted from Kolb (1984, 2015); evidence categories informed by Kirkpatrick and Kirkpatrick (2006) and Gulikers et al. (2004).

From Exposure to Practice

Exposure means that a learner encounters a situation in which a particular competency is relevant. Exposure is educationally useful, but it should not be confused with acquisition. A student may observe a conflict without learning how to manage conflict. Practice occurs when the student actively uses a strategy and receives feedback, and repeated practice with targeted feedback is among the more robust conditions for skill development (Ambrose et al., 2010; Hattie & Timperley, 2007).

From Practice to Demonstrated Competency

Demonstrated competency requires evidence that the learner can perform the relevant behaviour to an agreed standard. Evidence can be performance-based, observational, qualitative or quantitative. Communication competence might be demonstrated through a structured negotiation assessed with a rubric, while adaptability might be demonstrated by how a learner revises a plan after a scenario changes. Assessment of this kind is strengthened when the task, its physical and social context, the form of the result and the criteria applied all resemble the professional situation the competency is intended for (Gulikers et al., 2004).

From Demonstrated Competency to Transfer

Transfer is the ability to use learning in a different situation, and it is a higher-level challenge. A student may perform effectively in a familiar simulation but struggle when the context changes; reviews of training transfer

indicate that both the design of the learning event and the characteristics of the subsequent environment influence whether learning is used (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). Transfer should therefore be intentionally designed into the curriculum through multiple contexts, delayed assessment and authentic tasks that encourage deliberate abstraction of the underlying principle (Perkins & Salomon, 1992).

Methodological Positioning

The paper is positioned as a conceptual and practice-based case analysis. The cases are used to illustrate pedagogical processes rather than to establish causal effects. This positioning is essential because the available evidence does not provide the full methodological information required for a controlled empirical claim (Shadish et al., 2002).

Four evidence levels are distinguished: (1) participation in an activity, (2) student perceptions of learning, (3) observed behavioural change, and (4) demonstrated competency. These levels correspond broadly to the reaction, learning and behaviour tiers of established evaluation frameworks (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). They can complement one another but should not be treated as interchangeable.

Table 3 Levels of Evidence in Experiential-Learning Research

Evidence level	Meaning	Example	Interpretive caution
Participation	Student took part in activity	Completed simulation round	Does not prove learning
Perception	Student reports perceived change	"I became more confident"	Subjective; vulnerable to method and expectancy effects (Podsakoff et al., 2003)
Observed behaviour	Educator or peer records behaviour	More effective turn-taking	Requires systematic observation and inter-rater procedures
Demonstrated competency	Performance meets defined criteria	Negotiation rubric score	Stronger evidence when instrument is reliable and valid

Case Study 1: Business Simulation

Description of the Learning Activity

The first case uses a business simulation as an experiential learning environment. Students work within a structured scenario in which decisions influence subsequent conditions or outcomes. The simulation creates a simplified representation of a complex decision environment, and students may be required to interpret information, allocate resources, make strategic choices, coordinate with team members and respond to changing conditions. Business gaming of this kind has a long history in management education and has evolved from simple accounting exercises into multi-round, team-based decision environments (Faria et al., 2009).

The pedagogical strength of simulation lies in consequence visibility. In conventional instruction, a student may write that a particular strategy involves risk; in a simulation, the learner can make a risky decision and then observe its consequences. Research on computer-based simulation training similarly emphasises that the value of the method lies in compressing decision–outcome cycles so that teams can examine their own reasoning (Granlund, 2008). This does not mean that the simulation perfectly represents real business environments; rather, it provides a controlled setting in which selected aspects of decision-making can be practised repeatedly. Meta-analytic evidence indicates that simulation games can be associated with higher declarative and procedural knowledge and self-efficacy than comparison instruction, but that these advantages depend heavily on how the game is embedded in instruction — for example, whether learners can access it repeatedly and whether it supplements rather than replaces other teaching (Sitzmann, 2011).

Life-Skills Opportunities in the Simulation

Decision-making is central because students must select among alternatives under incomplete information (Rouvrais et al., 2018). Problem-solving arises when outcomes do not match expectations. Communication is

required to explain and negotiate decisions. Collaboration is necessary because teams must coordinate roles and information, and the willingness of members to challenge a dominant proposal depends on the team's climate (Edmondson, 1999). Self-management is required to meet deadlines and prepare decisions (Zimmerman, 2002). Adaptability becomes visible when simulation conditions change.

Application of the ELT Cycle

Concrete Experience occurs when students participate directly in the simulation. Reflective Observation occurs after each decision round when teams examine outcomes and identify reasons for success or failure. Abstract Conceptualisation occurs when the educator links the experience to strategy, leadership, risk, communication or decision-making theory. Active Experimentation occurs when students change their strategy in a subsequent round (Kolb, 2015). The multi-round structure makes the simulation an unusually direct instantiation of the cycle, because each round of experimentation immediately becomes the next round's concrete experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Facilitation Questions

The following debriefing prompts are designed to move students from description toward analysis and conceptual connection, consistent with guidance on structured debriefing (Fanning & Gaba, 2007):

- What information did your team use to make the decision?
- Which assumption had the greatest influence on your decision?
- What alternative options did you consider?
- How did disagreement within the team affect the final choice?
- What evidence suggests that the strategy worked or failed?
- What would you change in the next round?
- Which academic concept helps explain the outcome?
- How might the same decision be handled in a real professional context?

Interpretation of the Reported >15% Assessment Difference

An earlier version of the manuscript reported an improvement of more than 15% in assessment scores compared with a previous term. This observation may be pedagogically interesting, but it cannot be treated as causal evidence without additional information. A difference between two cohorts can arise from many factors, including differences in student characteristics, prior knowledge, assessment difficulty, teaching conditions, grading practices, attendance, instructor experience or other changes occurring between terms. Comparisons between non-equivalent groups formed at different times are particularly vulnerable to selection, history, instrumentation and maturation threats to internal validity (Shadish et al., 2002).

If the numerical result is retained in a future empirical version, the manuscript should report the sample size of each cohort, demographic or academic characteristics where relevant, the assessment instrument, whether assessments were equivalent, descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation, the statistical test used, effect size, significance level and plausible confounders. Where individual-level pre-post data are available, a stronger design could compare change within students and, where possible, against a comparison group, for example through a non-equivalent control-group design with pretest (Shadish et al., 2002).

The present paper therefore uses the phrase "reported assessment difference" rather than "improvement caused by experiential learning." This wording preserves the original observation while avoiding an unsupported causal

interpretation, and it is consistent with the caution urged in reviews that find simulation effects to be conditional on instructional design rather than automatic (Sitzmann, 2011).

Case Study 2: Overseas Experiential Learning

The second case involves students learning in an overseas environment that differs from their ordinary educational, social or cultural context. Such programmes can include visits, institutional interactions, professional exposure, collaborative activities, field-based learning and culturally situated tasks. The educational value comes from encountering situations that require learners to interpret unfamiliar information and adjust their behaviour. Research on short-term study abroad, however, indicates that gains in intercultural sensitivity are neither uniform nor guaranteed, and that programme design and structured processing matter considerably (Anderson et al., 2006).

Communication Across Contexts

Students may encounter different communication styles, expectations, accents, institutional conventions and cultural practices. These situations can make previously invisible assumptions visible. Learners may need to clarify meaning rather than assume understanding, listen carefully and adapt the way they communicate — behaviours that Deardorff (2006) identifies as observable components of intercultural competence, alongside the underlying attitudes of curiosity, openness and tolerance for ambiguity.

Adaptability and Uncertainty

An unfamiliar environment naturally introduces uncertainty. Students may have to navigate new routines, schedules, social expectations or problem situations. With appropriate support, such uncertainty can become an opportunity to practise planning, flexibility and independent decision-making (Rouvrais et al., 2018). Learners' willingness to persist in such conditions is influenced by their beliefs about their own capability to manage them (Bandura, 1997).

Cultural Learning and Reflection

Cultural exposure should not be reduced to collecting memorable experiences. Structured reflection can ask learners to examine their assumptions, compare interpretations and identify how cultural context influenced an interaction. Reflection that surfaces and questions taken-for-granted frames of reference is more likely to produce durable change in perspective than reflection that merely recounts events (Mezirow, 1991; Moon, 2004). This approach encourages deeper learning rather than superficial observation.

Application of the ELT Cycle

Concrete Experience occurs through direct participation. Reflective Observation can be supported through journals, group discussions and debriefings (Gibbs, 1988). Abstract Conceptualisation links the experience to communication, leadership, intercultural learning and adaptability concepts (Deardorff, 2006). Active Experimentation occurs when learners apply a revised approach in later interactions (Kolb, 2015).

Observed Perceptions versus Demonstrated Learning Outcomes

A major methodological distinction in this paper concerns perceived learning. Students' voices are important because they reveal how learners interpret an experience, what they believe they learned and which aspects they found meaningful. However, perception is one form of evidence rather than a complete measure of competency (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006).

For example, if a student states that an overseas programme increased confidence, the statement can be reported as a perceived change. To determine whether communication competence changed, researchers could additionally use a performance task, structured observation, peer assessment or a validated measure administered before and after the programme (Deardorff, 2006; Gulikers et al., 2004). Triangulation across methods and

sources would provide a more robust evidence base and reduce reliance on a single self-report instrument (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

Table 4 Matching Claim Type to Appropriate Wording and Stronger Evidence

Claim type	Appropriate wording	Stronger evidence
Student perception	Students reported increased confidence.	Pre-post self-report plus qualitative evidence
Observed behaviour	Facilitators observed more frequent participation.	Structured observation rubric with inter-rater procedures
Academic performance	Assessment scores differed between cohorts.	Comparable assessments, cohort data and statistical analysis
Competency development	Students demonstrated improved decision-making.	Validated measure plus authentic performance task
Transfer	Students applied learning in another context.	Delayed follow-up and new-context performance

The Role of Facilitation

Facilitation is one of the most important conditions connecting experience to learning. Without facilitation, students may complete an activity but fail to identify the underlying principle (Morris, 2020). Effective facilitation does not mean telling students the answer immediately. Instead, it involves designing questions, providing feedback, creating space for multiple interpretations and helping learners connect experience with disciplinary knowledge. Kolb and Kolb (2017) describe this as a dynamic set of educator roles — facilitator, subject expert, standard-setter and coach — adopted at different points of the learning cycle rather than a single fixed teaching style.

Before the Activity

- Explain the learning objectives and the life skills that students will practise, so that intended outcomes, activities and assessment are aligned (Biggs, 1996).
- Clarify roles, expectations, ethical boundaries and assessment criteria.
- Provide enough background knowledge to prevent avoidable confusion.
- Prepare students for uncertainty and explain how support will be available (Edmondson, 1999).

During the Activity

- Observe without unnecessarily taking control of student decision-making, preserving the autonomy that supports self-determined engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
- Ask probing questions that encourage justification and evidence (Facione, 1990).
- Provide timely feedback when safety, ethics or major misconceptions require intervention (Hattie & Timperley, 2007).
- Encourage participation from quieter students and manage unequal group participation.

After the Activity

- Conduct a structured debrief rather than relying only on informal conversation; the debriefing phase is widely regarded as the point at which simulation-based experience is converted into learning (Fanning & Gaba, 2007).

- Ask students to identify decisions, assumptions, emotions and outcomes (Boud et al., 1985; Gibbs, 1988).
- Connect observations to theory and professional practice (Morris, 2020).
- Require students to identify one change they would make in a future situation, thereby closing the loop toward active experimentation (Kolb, 2015).

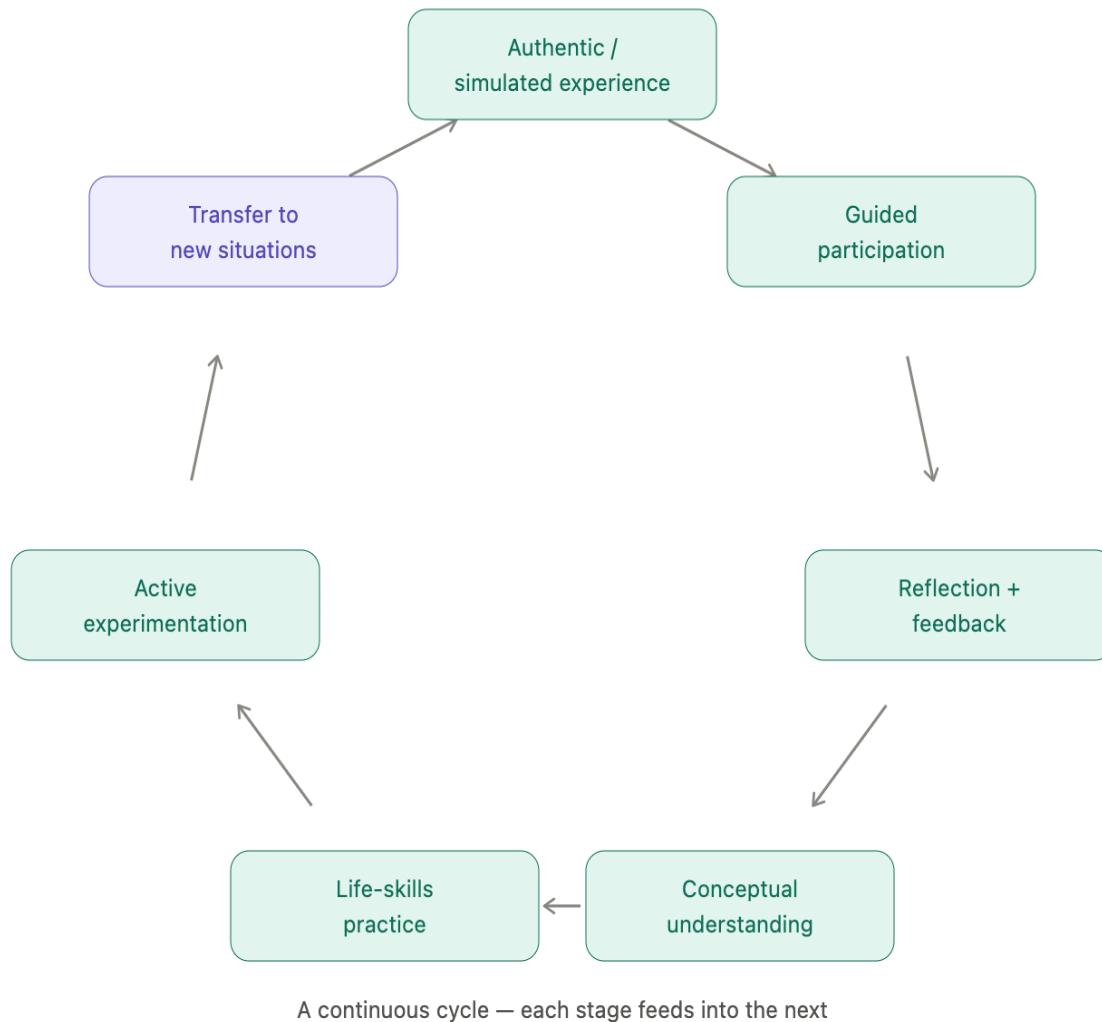


Figure 2. Retained original practice-based framework (expanded)

Proposed Expanded Framework for Life-Skills Development

The framework extends the earlier manuscript by making the movement from activity to transferable competency explicit. It begins with authentic or simulated experience but does not assume that the experience itself produces learning (Dewey, 1938; Morris, 2020). Guided participation ensures that students know what they are expected to notice and practise. Reflection and feedback make performance visible (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Conceptual understanding gives meaning to the experience. Life-skills practice allows repeated use. Active experimentation tests revised behaviour, while transfer examines whether learning is usable beyond the original activity (Perkins & Salomon, 1992).

Level 1 — Exposure

At the exposure level, learners encounter a situation requiring a life skill. The objective is awareness and initial engagement. Evidence may include participation, initial decisions or reflection. Exposure is necessary but insufficient, corresponding to the lowest tier of evaluation evidence (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006).

Level 2 — Practice

At the practice level, learners repeatedly use the competency and receive feedback. This stage should include opportunities to make mistakes and try again, which requires a climate in which error is treated as information rather than as failure (Edmondson, 1999). Rubrics, peer feedback and facilitator comments can make the expected behaviour concrete and support students in monitoring their own performance (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

Level 3 — Transfer

At the transfer level, students apply the competency in a different situation. Transfer is the strongest test of whether learning has moved beyond the original activity (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). A student who can adapt a strategy in a new scenario demonstrates more than a student who performs successfully only under familiar conditions (Perkins & Salomon, 1992).

DISCUSSION

The two cases demonstrate that experiential learning can take different forms depending on the learning environment, the degree of structure and the nature of the challenges presented to students. The business simulation and the overseas experiential-learning programme represent complementary contexts: the former provides controlled opportunities for decision-making and repeated experimentation, while the latter exposes students to less predictable social and cultural situations. These differences matter because life-skills development is multidimensional and different learning environments provide different opportunities for practice (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Business Simulation as a Structured Experiential Environment

The business simulation provides a relatively controlled setting in which students make decisions, observe consequences and modify their strategies. Its main educational strength lies in the opportunity for repeated experimentation. Students can make a decision, examine its consequences, reconsider their assumptions and test an alternative strategy in a subsequent round (Faria et al., 2009; Granlund, 2008).

This sequence corresponds closely with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. The decision provides Concrete Experience; analysis of the outcome supports Reflective Observation; connecting the outcome with business concepts facilitates Abstract Conceptualisation; and applying a revised strategy represents Active Experimentation (Kolb, 2015).

The simulation also creates opportunities to practise several life skills simultaneously. Group decision-making requires students to explain ideas, listen to alternative views, negotiate and reach collective decisions. Managing deadlines and responsibilities provides practice in self-management (Zimmerman, 2002), while analysing outcomes requires problem-solving and higher-order thinking (Facione, 1990). The value of the simulation therefore lies not only in practising business decisions but also in integrating cognitive, interpersonal and self-management skills within a structured environment.

Overseas Experiential Learning as an Open-Ended Learning Environment

The overseas experiential-learning programme provides a contrasting environment characterised by unfamiliar social, cultural and institutional contexts. Unlike simulation, where variables are deliberately structured, overseas experiences may involve situations that students cannot fully anticipate or control.

Such conditions create opportunities to practise adaptability. Students may need to modify communication strategies, seek clarification, reconsider assumptions or respond to unfamiliar expectations. Interaction with people from different cultural backgrounds can also encourage active listening, perspective-taking and sensitivity to alternative ways of thinking and behaving (Deardorff, 2006).

At the same time, the open-ended nature of the experience creates greater variation among learners. Students may encounter different situations and interpret similar experiences differently, and empirical work on short-term programmes reports uneven and sometimes non-significant changes across intercultural dimensions (Anderson et al., 2006). This makes the learning environment potentially rich but also more difficult to standardise and assess. Evidence from such programmes therefore needs to distinguish between participation, perceived learning and demonstrated competency.

Comparison of the Two Experiential Contexts

The two cases can be understood as providing different forms of experiential complexity.

Table 5 Comparison of Business Simulation and Overseas Experiential Learning

Dimension	Business simulation	Overseas experiential learning
Learning environment	Structured and controlled	Open-ended and contextual
Main challenge	Strategic decision-making	Adaptation to unfamiliar contexts
Repetition	Usually high	Variable
Feedback	Relatively immediate	May be delayed or informal
Prominent life skills	Decision-making, problem-solving, collaboration	Communication, adaptability, self-management, perspective-taking
Uncertainty	Designed within the activity	Naturally occurring
Assessment	Relatively easier to standardise	More difficult to standardise
Transfer	Can be tested through new scenarios	Can be examined through later academic or professional tasks

The comparison indicates that experiential activities should be selected according to their intended learning purposes rather than simply their novelty or level of student engagement (Biggs, 1996). Educators also need to consider what evidence the activity can reasonably generate.

From Participation to Demonstrated Learning

A central implication of the cases is that participation should not be equated with learning. Students may participate actively in a simulation without critically analysing their decisions, just as students may have extensive overseas experiences without developing a deeper understanding of adaptability or intercultural communication (Anderson et al., 2006).

Experiential learning therefore involves more than exposure to an activity; its educational value depends on how the experience is processed and subsequently used (Morris, 2020). For this reason, the manuscript distinguishes among different levels of evidence:

- **Participation** indicates exposure to the learning experience.
- **Perceived learning** reflects students' own judgments about what they learned.
- **Observed behaviour** provides evidence of how students acted in the learning context.
- **Demonstrated competency** requires evidence that a skill can be performed against defined criteria.
- **Transfer** indicates whether learning is applied in a new situation.

This hierarchy parallels established evaluation tiers (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006) and is particularly important for interpreting the two cases. The available evidence can support discussion of learning opportunities and perceptions, but stronger claims about life-skills development require systematic measurement.

Reflection as the Learning Mechanism

Reflection is the process through which students make sense of experience and connect it with conceptual understanding (Boud et al., 1985). In the simulation, reflection may involve examining why a strategy succeeded or failed, what assumptions shaped the decision and what alternative approaches could have been used. In the overseas programme, reflection may involve analysing communication difficulties, cultural assumptions, unexpected situations or changes in personal responses.

Reflection should therefore move beyond recounting what happened. Questions such as *Why did I respond in this way? What assumptions influenced my decision? What evidence supported my approach? What would I change in a similar situation?* help students move from experience towards conceptual understanding, and staged reflective frameworks provide a usable structure for such questioning (Gibbs, 1988). Morris (2020) positions critical reflection as the element that most consistently distinguishes experiential learning from mere activity, while Schön (1983) emphasises that skilled practitioners reflect both during and after action.

Facilitation and Feedback

The educator's role is particularly important in converting experience into educationally meaningful learning. Rather than simply delivering information, the educator designs the activity, establishes learning objectives, guides student engagement, provides feedback and helps students connect practical events with relevant concepts (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

Feedback is especially important when students encounter failure or uncertainty. Feedback is most effective when it addresses the task, the process used and the learner's self-regulation, rather than the learner's person (Hattie & Timperley, 2007), and when it is designed so that students can act on it in a subsequent attempt (Boud & Molloy, 2013). In the simulation, an unsuccessful strategy can become a learning opportunity when students are encouraged to analyse its causes and test alternatives. In the overseas programme, an unfamiliar or uncomfortable interaction can similarly become productive when students are supported in examining what occurred and considering alternative responses.

Facilitation and feedback therefore function as mechanisms that help students interpret experience rather than merely participate in it (Fanning & Gaba, 2007).

Implications for VUCA-Oriented Learning

The cases are relevant to learning in VUCA environments because they expose students to different forms of uncertainty (Lemoine et al., 2017). The simulation introduces controlled uncertainty through changing conditions and strategic consequences, whereas the overseas programme involves naturally occurring uncertainty arising from unfamiliar social and cultural settings. Rouvrais et al. (2018) make a comparable distinction in categorising learning situations by the type of perturbation they introduce.

Both contexts can provide opportunities to practise decision-making, communication, adaptability and self-management. However, the present paper does not establish that participation itself produces VUCA readiness. Instead, the cases illustrate how experiential environments can be designed to provide opportunities for practising competencies that may be relevant to uncertain and changing contexts.

From Practice to Transfer

The development of a skill within an activity does not necessarily mean that the skill will be used elsewhere. Transfer therefore represents an important but separate stage of experiential learning (Baldwin & Ford, 1988).

Educators can support transfer by introducing new situations that require students to apply previously practised skills. A business simulation can be followed by a different scenario involving new constraints, while overseas learning can be followed by an intercultural case or professional task requiring students to apply their observations. Such sequencing encourages the deliberate abstraction that supports high-road transfer (Perkins & Salomon, 1992).

Delayed assessment can further examine whether students continue to use these skills after the original experience. Such evidence would provide a stronger basis for claims about sustained learning than immediate satisfaction or self-report alone (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006).

Refined Pedagogical Proposition

Taken together, the cases suggest that experiential learning is most educationally meaningful when experiences are deliberately connected with reflection, conceptual understanding, feedback, practice and subsequent application (Morris, 2020). The framework can therefore be represented as:

Experience → Reflection → Conceptualisation → Feedback and Practice → Application → Transfer

This sequence should be understood as a pedagogical design principle rather than a causal equation. It identifies processes that educators can intentionally incorporate into experiential-learning activities and also indicates points at which learning can be assessed, consistent with the logic of constructive alignment (Biggs, 1996).

Overall Interpretation

Overall, the two cases illustrate complementary possibilities within experiential learning. The business simulation demonstrates the value of structured decision-making, repetition and immediate feedback, while the overseas programme illustrates the learning opportunities created by unfamiliar social and cultural contexts.

The central contribution of the discussion is therefore not the claim that experiential learning automatically develops life skills. Rather, experiential learning can create meaningful contexts in which students **practise, examine and apply life skills**, provided that the experience is supported by appropriate facilitation, reflection, feedback and opportunities for transfer (Kolb & Kolb, 2017; Morris, 2020).

This interpretation keeps the discussion consistent with the evidence available in the manuscript. The cases provide a basis for identifying learning opportunities and pedagogical processes, while stronger claims about actual improvement in life skills require systematic empirical investigation using validated measures, structured observation, authentic performance assessment and evidence of transfer over time (Gulikers et al., 2004; Shadish et al., 2002).

Implications for Higher Education

The integration of experiential learning and life-skills development has important implications for higher education institutions, curriculum planners, teachers, assessment practices and students. In contemporary higher education, the purpose of education extends beyond the transmission of disciplinary knowledge. Universities and colleges are increasingly expected to prepare learners to deal with complex professional situations, changing technologies, uncertain employment conditions, intercultural environments and rapidly changing social demands (Lemoine et al., 2017; World Economic Forum, 2025). Life skills therefore need to be integrated systematically into teaching and learning rather than being treated as additional or optional competencies (OECD, 2018).

Experiential learning provides an opportunity to connect theoretical knowledge with practical application. However, meaningful integration requires institutional planning, appropriate assessment, trained faculty, inclusive participation and opportunities for transfer (O'Flynn et al., 2023). The following implications are particularly important.

Curriculum Design

Life skills should be explicitly mapped to curriculum outcomes rather than being mentioned broadly as “soft skills” or “employability skills.” When curriculum documents use general statements such as “students will develop communication and leadership skills,” it becomes difficult to determine what students are actually expected to learn and how their development will be assessed. Curriculum designers should therefore identify specific competencies, observable behaviours and appropriate learning experiences (Biggs, 1996; Yorke, 2006).

For example, if critical thinking is an intended learning outcome, students should be provided with situations where they must evaluate evidence, compare alternatives, identify assumptions and justify decisions (Facione, 1990). Similarly, if communication is an intended outcome, students should have opportunities to present ideas, listen actively, negotiate, participate in discussions and communicate with different audiences (Phan, 2024).

Curriculum design should therefore establish alignment among **learning outcomes, learning activities, facilitation and assessment** (Biggs, 1996). Experiential activities should not be added simply because they are innovative or engaging; each activity should have a clear pedagogical purpose and should contribute to one or more defined learning outcomes.

Table 6 Illustrative Mapping of Life Skills Across Undergraduate Curriculum Stages

Curriculum stage	Possible life skills	Experiential strategy
Early undergraduate level	Communication, self-management, collaboration	Group activities, presentations, reflective journals
Intermediate level	Problem-solving, decision-making, critical thinking	Case studies, simulations, project-based learning
Advanced level	Leadership, adaptability, negotiation	Business simulations, field projects, internships
Final stage	Transfer, professional communication, independent decision-making	Internship, community projects, authentic professional tasks

Such progressive curriculum design can prevent life-skills education from becoming a one-time workshop. Instead, students encounter increasingly complex opportunities to practise the same competencies in different contexts, which is one of the conditions associated with transfer (Perkins & Salomon, 1992).

Another important consideration is **spiral development**. A skill such as communication should not be taught once and assumed to be mastered. Students may first learn basic communication, later practise professional communication, and eventually apply communication strategies in complex multicultural or workplace situations. Experiential learning is particularly suitable for this progression because students can repeatedly encounter, practise, reflect upon and refine the same competency (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Thus, curriculum design should move from **exposure** → **guided practice** → **independent practice** → **transfer**. This progression supports the development of self-directed learners who gradually take greater responsibility for their own learning (Knowles, 1975; Zimmerman, 2002).

Assessment

Assessment is one of the most important implications of integrating experiential learning into higher education. If institutions expect students to develop life skills, these skills should be assessed through appropriate forms of evidence. Traditional examinations are useful for assessing conceptual knowledge, but they may not adequately demonstrate skills such as collaboration, negotiation, adaptability, communication or decision-making (Gulikens et al., 2004).

Experiential learning therefore requires a broader assessment approach. Performance-based assessment, observation, reflective journals, portfolios, peer assessment, self-assessment, simulations and authentic tasks can be used alongside conventional examinations (Moon, 2004).

For example, communication can be assessed through a presentation or structured negotiation. Collaboration can be assessed through group-project processes and peer evaluation. Decision-making can be assessed through a simulation in which students must justify their choices. Adaptability can be assessed by changing the conditions of a task and examining whether students revise their strategy appropriately.

Rubrics are particularly useful because they convert broad competencies into observable indicators and help students internalise the standards being applied (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). A rubric for decision-making might include:

- identification of the problem;
- use of relevant evidence;
- consideration of alternatives;
- recognition of risks;
- justification of the selected option;
- response to feedback; and
- ability to revise the decision when circumstances change.

Similarly, a communication rubric might examine clarity, active listening, questioning, audience awareness, responsiveness and respectful interaction.

Importantly, **student satisfaction should not be treated as equivalent to learning**. Students may enjoy an activity without developing the intended competency, while a challenging activity may produce substantial learning even if it is initially uncomfortable; reaction-level data and learning-level data occupy different tiers of evaluation evidence (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006). Satisfaction surveys can provide useful information about students' experiences, but they should be complemented by evidence of actual learning and performance.

Assessment should also maintain the distinction between **perceived learning and demonstrated learning**. If students report that they have become better decision-makers, this represents valuable evidence of perceived change; however, educators and researchers should ideally combine this information with performance evidence (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

A stronger assessment model can therefore combine:

Self-report + Observation + Performance Task + Reflection + Feedback

Such triangulation provides a more comprehensive picture of life-skills development (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Faculty Development

The successful implementation of experiential learning depends significantly on faculty competence. Experiential learning changes the role of the teacher from being primarily a transmitter of information to becoming a **designer, facilitator, observer, feedback provider and reflective-learning guide** (Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

This does not mean that disciplinary expertise becomes less important. On the contrary, disciplinary knowledge remains essential because students need theoretical concepts with which to interpret their experiences. However, faculty members also need pedagogical skills that enable them to connect experience with theory (Brookfield, 2017).

Faculty development programmes should therefore address several areas.

First, experiential activity design. Teachers need to understand how to create activities that have clear learning objectives, appropriate levels of challenge and meaningful opportunities for decision-making (Dewey, 1938; Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Second, questioning techniques. The quality of reflection depends heavily on the questions asked by the educator. Questions should move students beyond simple description (Gibbs, 1988). Instead of asking only “What happened?”, teachers can ask:

- Why do you think this happened?
- What assumptions influenced your decision?
- What alternative strategies were available?
- What evidence supports your interpretation?
- How did your decision affect other people?
- What would you do differently next time?
- How can this experience be connected to the theory studied in class?

Third, facilitation and debriefing. Teachers should learn how to conduct structured debriefing after an activity. Debriefing provides the bridge between experience and conceptual understanding, and is widely identified as the component of simulation-based education most responsible for learning (Fanning & Gaba, 2007). Without this bridge, experiential activities may remain isolated events rather than becoming meaningful learning experiences.

Fourth, feedback. Faculty members need to provide feedback that is specific, constructive and connected to observable behaviour (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Instead of saying “You need better leadership,” feedback could identify the specific behaviour that requires development, such as “You made the final decision without inviting input from two team members; next time, create an opportunity for each member to present evidence before the group decides.”

Finally, assessment literacy. Faculty members need preparation in designing rubrics, performance tasks, reflective assessments and other methods capable of evaluating life skills (Gulikers et al., 2004).

Institutions should therefore consider regular professional-development programmes on experiential pedagogy, assessment, facilitation, reflective practice and inclusive learning (O’Flynn et al., 2023).

Inclusive Participation

Experiential learning should be designed so that all students have meaningful opportunities to participate. Simply placing students in groups does not automatically create equitable participation. Differences in confidence, previous experience, language proficiency, social background, learning preferences and access to resources can influence who speaks, who leads and who remains silent (Edmondson, 1999).

For example, in an unstructured group discussion, confident students may repeatedly take leadership roles while quieter students may have limited opportunities to contribute. Similarly, students with previous professional experience may dominate decision-making in a simulation. If such patterns are not addressed, an activity intended to develop collaboration and leadership may actually reproduce unequal participation.

Structured roles can help address this problem. Different students can rotate through responsibilities such as:

- team leader;
- researcher;
- presenter;
- time manager;
- evidence evaluator;
- negotiator; and
- reflective observer.

Role rotation ensures that students experience different dimensions of collaborative work and distributes opportunities for practice more evenly (Ambrose et al., 2010).

Inclusive experiential learning also requires attention to accessibility. Activities involving travel, fieldwork or expensive resources may create barriers for some students, and equity of access is a recognised concern in the literature on study abroad and other high-cost experiential provision (Anderson et al., 2006). Institutions should therefore consider alternative forms of participation where necessary. The principle should be that the **learning outcome remains consistent even when the mode of participation differs**.

Inclusive design also means creating an environment in which students can make mistakes without fear of humiliation. Experiential learning depends on experimentation, and experimentation necessarily involves the possibility of failure; teams that are able to discuss error openly learn more effectively than those that are not (Edmondson, 1999). Teachers should therefore establish respectful classroom norms in which mistakes are treated as opportunities for analysis and improvement.

In this context, psychological and social safety is an important component of effective facilitation. Students should know what is expected, what support is available and how their performance will be assessed (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Transfer and Employability

One of the most important challenges in experiential learning is **transfer**. Students may perform successfully in a classroom simulation but fail to apply the same competency in an unfamiliar academic, social or professional environment (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). Higher education institutions should therefore deliberately create opportunities for students to transfer learning across contexts.

For example, a student may first practise negotiation during a classroom simulation. The next opportunity could involve negotiating responsibilities within a group project. Later, the student could apply the same principles during an internship, community project or professional placement (Eyler & Giles, 1999).

This creates a progression:

Classroom Experience → Reflection → Practice → New Context → Application → Further Reflection

Transfer tasks can be incorporated into internships, teaching practice, community engagement, entrepreneurship projects, research projects, service learning and professional simulations (Eyler, 2009; O'Flynn et al., 2023).

Employability should also be understood broadly. Employers may value disciplinary knowledge, but professional effectiveness also requires communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, self-management and responsible decision-making (World Economic Forum, 2025; Yorke, 2006). Experiential learning can provide students with concrete examples that they can later discuss during interviews and professional interactions.

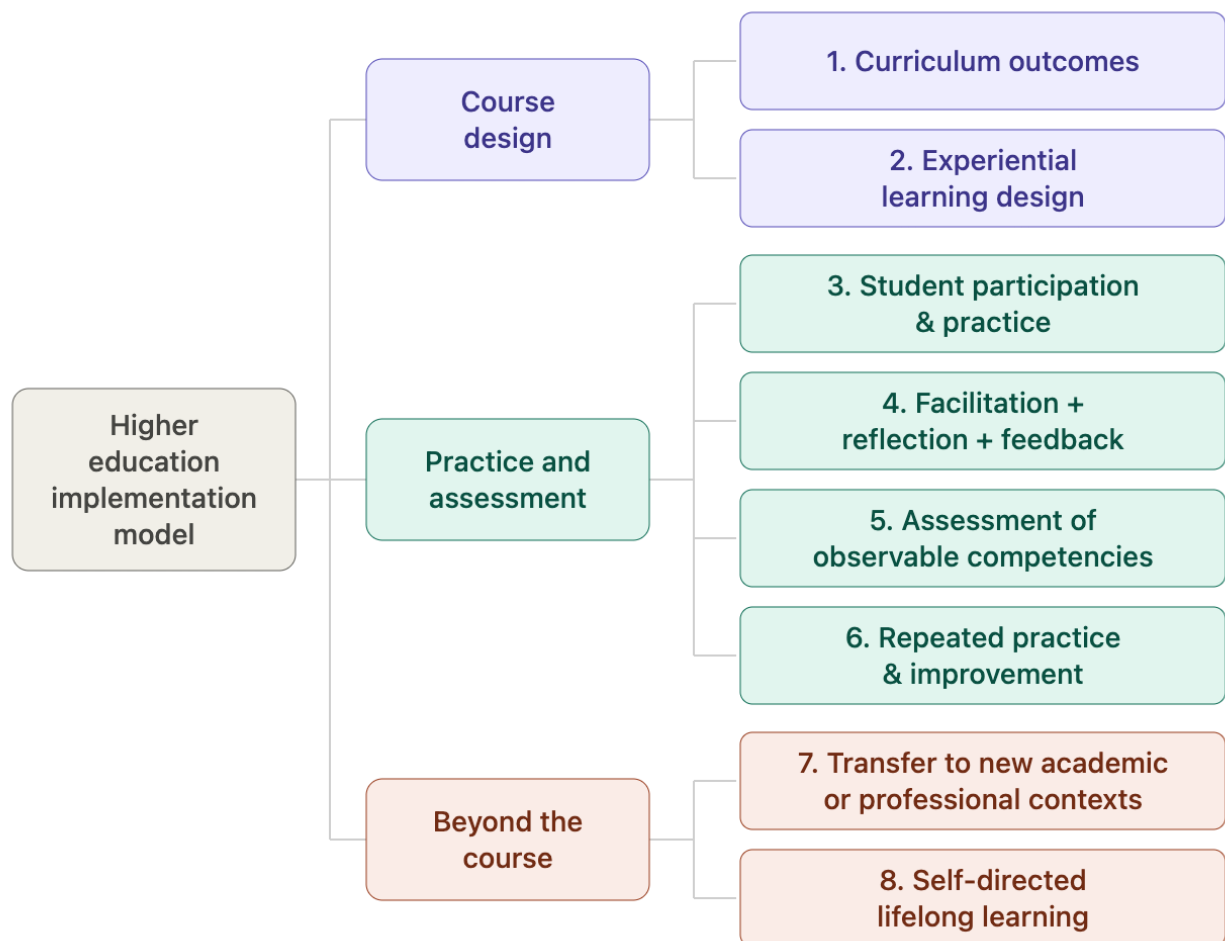
For instance, rather than simply stating “I have leadership skills,” a student can describe a specific situation in which they led a team, encountered disagreement, analysed the problem, changed their approach and achieved a particular outcome. Such experiences provide evidence-based narratives of competency.

Higher education institutions can therefore create **transfer portfolios** in which students document:

1. the experiential activity;
2. the skill being developed;
3. the challenge encountered;
4. the action taken;
5. feedback received;
6. reflection on performance;
7. changes made; and
8. evidence of application in a new context.

Such portfolios can support both academic development and professional identity formation (Moon, 2004; Yorke, 2006).

Overall, the implications for higher education extend beyond introducing more activities into classrooms. The central requirement is to develop an integrated system in which **curriculum design, experiential activities, facilitation, reflection, assessment and transfer work together**. When these elements are aligned, experiential learning can provide meaningful opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate transferable life skills while simultaneously strengthening disciplinary understanding and self-directed learning (Biggs, 1996; Kolb & Kolb, 2017).



Numbers show the order of implementation

Figure 3. Higher education implementation model.

Limitations

The paper is conceptual and practice-based rather than a controlled empirical investigation. The two cases are illustrative and cannot be assumed to represent all experiential-learning programmes. The available material does not provide sufficient information to establish causal relationships between the activities and life-skills outcomes, and the reported assessment difference between terms is therefore not treated as a demonstrated intervention effect (Shadish et al., 2002). Student perceptions and facilitator observations may also be influenced by response bias, expectations and contextual factors (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

A further limitation is the absence of a validated life-skills instrument within the present case analysis. Life skills are multidimensional, and different instruments measure different constructs (Deardorff, 2006; World Health Organization, 1997). Future research should select instruments whose conceptual definitions match the specific competencies being taught and should report reliability and validity evidence relevant to the study population.

Directions for Future Research

Table 7 Proposed Empirical Design for Evaluating Life-Skills Development

Stage	Method	Purpose	Examples of evidence
Pre-intervention	Validated life-skills scale plus baseline task	Establish baseline	Scale scores, performance rubric
Intervention	Structured experiential activity	Provide practice	Simulation/project records
During	Observation plus reflection	Document learning process	Journal, observation, peer feedback
Post-intervention	Same scale plus performance task	Examine change	Post scores, authentic task
Qualitative follow-up	Interview or focus group	Understand mechanisms	Themes and student accounts
Delayed follow-up	Transfer task	Examine durability and transfer	Performance in new context

Note. Design informed by Shadish et al. (2002), Gulikers et al. (2004) and Creswell and Plano Clark (2018).

Future studies should report participant numbers, sampling procedures, participant characteristics, intervention duration, facilitator role, instruments, reliability and validity, data-collection procedures and analytical methods. Quantitative studies may use pre-post designs, comparison groups or quasi-experimental approaches where appropriate (Shadish et al., 2002). Qualitative studies can examine how students interpret experience and how reflection contributes to learning. Mixed-methods studies may be particularly valuable because life-skills development involves both measurable performance and contextual processes (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Longitudinal research is also important. Some competencies may not become visible immediately after an activity. A student may understand a communication principle but only demonstrate transfer several weeks or months later in an internship, teaching placement or professional task (Baldwin & Ford, 1988).

Expanded Research Questions

- How does participation in structured experiential learning relate to changes in specific life-skill domains?
- Which ELT stage contributes most visibly to students' perceived and demonstrated learning?
- How does the quality of facilitation influence the transition from experience to reflection and conceptualisation?
- Do repeated experiential cycles produce stronger evidence of transfer than single exposure?
- How do student characteristics and prior experience influence outcomes?
- Which assessment methods provide the most reliable evidence of life-skills development?

- To what extent are life skills transferred from classroom simulations to authentic academic or professional settings?

CONCLUSION

Experiential learning offers a meaningful and potentially powerful pedagogical approach for supporting the development of life skills in higher education, particularly in contexts where students are expected to respond effectively to volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (Lemoine et al., 2017; Rouvrais et al., 2018). In such environments, disciplinary knowledge alone may not be sufficient. Students also require the ability to analyse unfamiliar situations, make informed decisions, communicate effectively, collaborate with others, manage their own learning and behaviour, respond constructively to challenges, and adapt their strategies when circumstances change (OECD, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2025). Experiential learning creates opportunities for students to practise these competencies in situations that are more active, contextualised and problem-oriented than conventional classroom instruction (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Morris, 2020).

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory provides a useful conceptual structure for understanding this process because it connects direct experience with reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984, 2015). The value of the model lies not simply in providing students with an experience, but in encouraging them to examine what happened, understand why it happened, connect the experience with relevant theoretical concepts, and apply their emerging understanding to subsequent situations. In this sense, experiential learning can contribute to the development of self-directed learners who are increasingly capable of monitoring their own performance, identifying areas for improvement and modifying their approaches on the basis of evidence and feedback (Knowles, 1975; Zimmerman, 2002).

The two experiential-learning contexts examined in this paper — the business simulation and the overseas experiential-learning programme — illustrate different but complementary ways of creating opportunities for life-skills development. The business simulation provides a relatively structured and controlled environment in which students can repeatedly make decisions, experience consequences, discuss outcomes and modify their strategies, and can therefore support problem-solving, critical thinking, decision-making, communication, collaboration and adaptability (Faria et al., 2009; Sitzmann, 2011). The overseas context, by contrast, exposes students to unfamiliar social, cultural and institutional environments, creating opportunities for communication, interpersonal understanding, cultural awareness, self-management, adaptability and independent decision-making (Deardorff, 2006). The educational value of either context, however, should not be assumed merely from participation in the activity.

An important argument of this paper is that **experience alone does not automatically constitute learning, and participation alone does not demonstrate competency** (Dewey, 1938; Morris, 2020). Students may participate actively in an experiential activity without necessarily developing the intended life skill. Meaningful development requires a deliberate connection among experience, reflection, facilitation, conceptual understanding, feedback, repeated practice and application in new situations. Reflection is particularly important because it enables learners to move beyond simply recalling what happened and instead examine their decisions, assumptions, emotions, behaviours and outcomes (Boud et al., 1985; Schön, 1983). Similarly, facilitation provides the intellectual and pedagogical support necessary to help students connect individual experiences with broader concepts and transferable principles (Fanning & Gaba, 2007; Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

The paper therefore makes an important distinction between **learning opportunities and evidence of learning outcomes**. An activity may create a valuable opportunity for students to practise communication, leadership, adaptability or decision-making, but this opportunity should not automatically be interpreted as proof that the competency has been acquired. Similarly, students' perceptions of increased confidence, communication ability or adaptability represent meaningful evidence of perceived learning, but they are different from objectively demonstrated changes in performance (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2006; Podsakoff et al., 2003). Stronger claims concerning life-skills development require stronger and more systematic evidence, including validated measurement instruments, structured observation, authentic performance tasks, clearly defined assessment

criteria, qualitative inquiry and, where possible, evidence of transfer across different contexts and over time (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Gulikers et al., 2004; Perkins & Salomon, 1992).

This distinction is particularly important for interpreting the evidence associated with the two cases. The reported difference of more than 15% in assessment performance in the business simulation case may indicate a potentially meaningful educational difference, but without information concerning sample size, assessment equivalence, baseline characteristics, statistical analysis, effect size and possible confounding variables, it should be treated as a descriptive observation rather than definitive evidence of an intervention effect (Shadish et al., 2002). Similarly, observations and student feedback from the overseas experiential-learning programme provide valuable information about participants' experiences and perceptions, but they should not be interpreted as conclusive evidence of demonstrated competency without systematic assessment (Anderson et al., 2006). This methodological caution strengthens rather than weakens the paper because it aligns the claims of the study with the evidence actually available.

The discussion also highlights the central role of the educator as a facilitator of experiential learning. Effective experiential pedagogy requires more than organising an interesting activity. Before the activity, students need clear learning objectives, appropriate preparation and an understanding of the competencies they are expected to practise (Biggs, 1996). During the activity, educators need to provide guidance, observe learner behaviour, ask probing questions and provide appropriate feedback without unnecessarily taking control of the learning process (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). After the activity, structured reflection and debriefing are necessary to help students interpret their experiences, connect them with theoretical concepts and identify strategies for future application (Fanning & Gaba, 2007; Gibbs, 1988). In this way, facilitation acts as a bridge between experience and meaningful learning.

The framework proposed in this paper consequently views life-skills development as a progressive process involving **exposure, practice, reflection, conceptualisation, experimentation and transfer**. Exposure provides the initial opportunity to encounter a particular challenge. Practice allows students to use the relevant skill. Reflection helps them examine their performance and identify strengths and weaknesses. Conceptualisation enables them to connect their experience with theoretical knowledge. Experimentation allows them to test improved strategies, while transfer determines whether the learning can be applied effectively in a different context (Perkins & Salomon, 1992). This final element is especially important because the ultimate purpose of life-skills education is not simply successful performance within one classroom activity, but the ability to use those skills across academic, professional, social and personal situations (World Health Organization, 1997).

From a higher-education perspective, the conceptual arguments presented in this paper suggest that life skills should be integrated deliberately into curriculum design rather than treated as incidental outcomes of extracurricular or experiential activities (OECD, 2018; Yorke, 2006). Educators should identify specific competencies, design learning experiences that provide opportunities to practise them, establish observable indicators of performance and incorporate structured reflection and assessment. Such an approach can help institutions move from general claims that experiential learning develops "soft skills" toward a more systematic understanding of what skills are being developed, how they are being practised and what evidence demonstrates their development.

The paper also identifies a clear need for future empirical research. Future studies should employ stronger research designs that combine quantitative and qualitative approaches where appropriate. Pre- and post-intervention measurements, comparison groups or quasi-experimental designs may provide evidence of changes in specific life-skill domains (Shadish et al., 2002). Authentic performance tasks and structured observation can complement self-report measures (Gulikers et al., 2004), while interviews, reflective journals and focus groups can provide insight into how students interpret their experiences. Longitudinal follow-up would further help determine whether students retain and transfer life skills beyond the immediate learning environment (Baldwin & Ford, 1988).

In conclusion, experiential learning should not be regarded as an automatic solution for life-skills development. Rather, it should be understood as a **pedagogical mechanism that can be intentionally designed, facilitated**

and assessed to create meaningful opportunities for life-skills development. Its effectiveness depends on the quality of the experience, the depth of reflection, the relevance of conceptual understanding, the quality of feedback, opportunities for repeated practice and the learner's ability to transfer knowledge and skills to new situations (Morris, 2020; Perkins & Salomon, 1992). By maintaining this distinction between opportunity and evidence, higher-education institutions can make more defensible claims about the contribution of experiential learning to life-skills development while preserving its considerable pedagogical potential.

Ultimately, the goal is not simply to provide students with more experiences, but to transform experiences into **reflective, transferable and self-directed learning.** When experience is systematically connected with reflection, theory, feedback, experimentation and transfer, experiential learning can become an important component of higher education aimed at preparing learners to respond thoughtfully, responsibly and adaptively to the complex demands of contemporary life and work (Dewey, 1938; Kolb & Kolb, 2017).

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