

## **Student Consultancy Projects Playbook: Learning Outcomes and a Framework for Teaching Practice in an International Entrepreneurial Context**

Consultancy projects as an action learning method have become an integral part of management education at many business schools and universities. As an opportunity to apply management knowledge in practice, they have been proven to be a valuable experience when designed and executed adeptly by academics. Based on our activities and reflection as academics, and interviews with students and companies participating in five consultancy projects, this paper proposes a framework to execute student consultancy projects in the context of international entrepreneurship. Working with small, new, and innovative companies at a foreign location seeking to internationalise, the framework highlights the learning outcomes to be achieved by students along the consultancy process. Such outcomes may be cognitive including the integration of previous knowledge with practical insights, affective such as an appreciation of other's views, and behavioural including the development of transferable communication and management skills. Additionally, the framework provides a guideline for the necessary teaching practice for managerial learning to take place. While the project's team and client problem are critical, knowledgeable supervisors are needed especially at the beginning, while the level of intervention needs to be adjusted throughout the process.

*Keywords: Teaching Practice; Action Learning; Student Consultancy Projects; International Entrepreneurship*

## 1. Introduction

Research from the Open University (2017) finds that one in five companies fail to recruit suitable talents for top and middle management positions, while 43% of surveyed companies state that candidates lack management skills. Such lacking skills include business and customer awareness, communication skills, team working and technology skills (McMurray et al. 2016). Responding to the criticism about the lack of graduates' relevant skills, universities and business schools increasingly rely on active learning methods (Heriot et al. 2008). Among a variety of active learning methods, consultancy projects as a method implementing experiential learning have been praised for being the most engaging and providing ample opportunities for feedback and learning throughout the consultancy process. Education outcomes targeted through consultancy projects are not just cognitive learning such as the acquisition of factual knowledge, but also include affective learning by self-actualisation and behavioural learning developing practical skills (Brownell & Jameson 2004; Scott 2017). As proposed by action learning, consultancy projects foster individual learning while solving a real business problem in a team. By learning from peers, academics, and clients, and through reflection, they prepare students to encounter real problems after their studies and help to develop employment-ready graduates (Raelin 1997; Raelin & Coghlan 2006; O'Leary 2015). In parallel, the direct interaction with practitioners outside of the academic environment shifts students' mindset into a professional behavioural mode (Fitch 2011).

Achieving cognitive, affective, and behavioural learning outcomes, projects in the context of international entrepreneurship can be a particularly promising setting for action learning via consultancy projects. Students can acquire knowledge on the innovation and commercialisation process, and gain practical insights into enterprising from direct contact with entrepreneurs and small businesses (Cooper et al. 2004). Furthermore, the entrepreneurial context in combination with the international nature of the experience may develop skills and behaviours relevant outside of new ventures such as creative thinking, assertiveness, perseverance, or taking initiative, and intercultural communication skills (Hay 2011; Mwasalwiba 2010; Moberg 2014).

With learning being highly context-dependent, the setting and management of consultancy projects are crucial (Heriot et al. 2008). Fitch (2011) finds that professionalism does not automatically develop by teaching students professional behaviour and challenging them with client projects. Instead, academics are required to carefully design and manage consultancy projects to support students' experiences. Additionally, with academics transforming from lecturers and tutors to facilitators, supervisors, and coaches, teaching requirements and action learning pedagogics may conflict with academics' established routines (McGill & Beaty 2001; Rasmussen & Sørheim 2006; Weinstein 2012; Johnson & Spicer 2006).

Therefore, the research objective of this paper is to propose a framework for planning and organising a student consultancy project experience. Based on experience at [the authors' university], which has been recognised as best practice by the European Enterprise Network (EEN) for connecting academia and business, the aim of the framework is to maximise the potential learning outcomes and to guide academics along the process. As suggested by Pedler et al. (2005), practice of action-based learning needs to be examined and disseminated. Following their call, two research questions guide this work:

1. Which learning outcomes can be achieved through the consultancy project experience in an international entrepreneurship context?
2. What steps and considerations are part of academics' curriculum planning and teaching practice to deliver the planned learning outcomes and provide a valuable learning experience for students throughout the consultancy project process?

Focusing on learning outcomes and the role of academics' teaching practice, the paper begins by summarising relevant literature on action learning, student consultancy projects, and international entrepreneurship. A description of the research method and context is subsequently provided. Along the stages of the consultancy project process, challenges arising from the context are illustrated using the accounts of company representatives and students, and our reflection on the activities as academics in the process. In the context of international entrepreneurship, cognitive, affective, and behavioural learning outcomes have been identified including the integration of previous knowledge and theories with practical insights from entrepreneurs, an appreciation of other's views due to diverse backgrounds, and the improvement of transferable skills. Reflecting on relevant literature, required teaching practice maximising the educational gains for students is discussed and summarised in a framework for execution. While the initial set-up of teams, businesses, and academics is crucial, academics need to adjust their level of intervention along the consultancy project process to develop students' self-directed learning skills. These findings on learning outcomes and teaching practice are then discussed with the limitations of the provided framework.

## **2. Action-learning practice as part of management studies**

Learning improves with the active participation of the learner in the process. Thus, universities and business schools increasingly rely on active learning methods (Heriot et al. 2008). Learning should not just be transmitted passively, but learners should participate in active tasks that lead to experiences. For even deeper learning, these activities should be complemented by reflection (Cooper et al. 2004). These findings are central to experiential learning: Experiential learning is an iterative process of experimenting, experiencing, reflecting, and conceptualising. Students reflect on their experiences in experiments. These reflections are then distilled into abstract conceptualisations. Conceptualisations are transformed into new experiments, leading to new experiences (Kolb 1984).

### 2.1 Learning through action learning

Whereas the concept of experiential learning structures the learning process, action learning as a method can facilitate experiential learning that encourages taking action and reflecting on the experience, making generalisations and testing new ideas (McGill & Beaty 2001). In action learning, students form a team to solve a real and relevant problem. Based on their ability to solve the problem, students will recognise knowledge and skill gaps, and self-direct their learning to close them. Applying knowledge allows reflecting on experiences and question information and theories, with additional learning opportunities from academics' and peers' feedback (Marsick & O'Neil 1999; Johnson & Spicer 2006; Scott 2017).

Using action learning, students can acquire not just factual knowledge required to solve problems, but also develop transferable skills including reasoning and behaving differently, acknowledging own emotions and their impact, and gaining a deeper understanding of

oneself (Weinstein 2012). These different types of development have been categorised into cognitive, affective and behavioural learning (Scott 2017; Brownell & Jameson 2004):

Cognitive learning refers to the expansion of students' knowledge and intellectual capacity (Moberg 2014). In the context of this study, factual knowledge on internationalising may be acquired with the decision-making constraints of young, small companies. Whereas students might experience less knowledge transferred from academics than in traditional lectures, retention of knowledge improves significantly due to the students' active engagement (Smith 2005; Dochy et al. 2003). Similarly, knowledge integration and understanding develop (Joham & Clarke 2012; Norman & Schmidt 1992), for example, by testing it with entrepreneurs' insights.

Reflection on the impact of their culture, personal style, ethics, experience, and effectiveness results in affective learning (Brownell & Jameson 2004; Scott 2017). Through comparison with others when working in teams and integrating different points of views, students develop self-insights that lead to a matured understanding of oneself and one's impact. In an international, entrepreneurial context, such perceptual differences might arise due to cultural and educational differences.

Similar to affective learning, action learning's focus on practical results improves students' knowledge application and implementation skills (Dochy et al. 2003). Using their factual knowledge and self-insights, students engage in behavioural learning and develop skills such as information searching in newly established markets, critical thinking and challenging entrepreneurs' assumptions, and communication and collaboration in diverse contexts (Ungaretti et al. 2015; Sonfield 1981). Students also acquire the behaviour of continuous learning by recognising the need to seek knowledge and regulate their learning (Joham & Clarke 2012), which are all transferable skills fostered by action learning (McGill & Beaty 2001; Weinstein 2012).

## 2.2 Academics' teaching practice in action learning

Academics facilitate the above learning experience. This facilitation includes creating a setting that encourages learning, including the formation of multicultural, gender-balanced teams, and selection of problems that are defined appropriately, challenging, significant, and offer learning opportunities (Edmonstone 2002). Starting the activity, academic facilitation includes creating a productive work environment, for example, by setting rules for team working, communication internally between team members and externally with client representatives, and maintaining that environment (Peterson 2004; McGill & Beaty 2001).

Besides facilitations, academics supervise and coach students to acquire knowledge but also question it. On the one hand, they may direct students to seek specific knowledge, steer them towards relevant directions, or clarify issues. This process may be complemented by a process of focused knowledge transfer introducing students to relevant knowledge using more traditional teaching methods such as short seminars and structured workshops. On the other hand, academics are required to engage students in questioning and applying knowledge, for example, by providing feedback and challenging students' ideas. While this process requires expertise in the field, academics must use it to direct students to solve the problem rather than feed them solutions (Revans 1982; Marsick & O'Neil 1999; Gibson & Hughes 1987). Setting intermediary milestones additionally ensures that students' work meets academic standards and requirements of their programme (Johnson & Spicer 2006), which is necessary in addition to academics' role as module administrators.

### 2.3 Implementing action learning using consultancy projects

Implementing action-based learning pedagogy, small consultancy projects allow student teams to solve a real organisational problem for a client under the facilitation, supervision, and coaching of academics. Since their introduction in the United States in the early 1970s, student consultancy projects have become “an invaluable learning program for undergraduate and graduate business students” (Cook & Belliveau 2006, p.5). For the execution of the consultancy projects, three groups are required: academics, clients and students. Forming the process below, students are at the centre of the preparation, initiation, execution, and delivery of student consultancy projects (Figure 1). After the preparation to facilitate learning, students’ behaviour evolves gradually from seeking knowledge guided by academics during project initiation, to more self-directed learning in the execution stage. Reaching the delivery phase, they should be able to critically challenge their clients’ and their own assumptions and preconceptions.

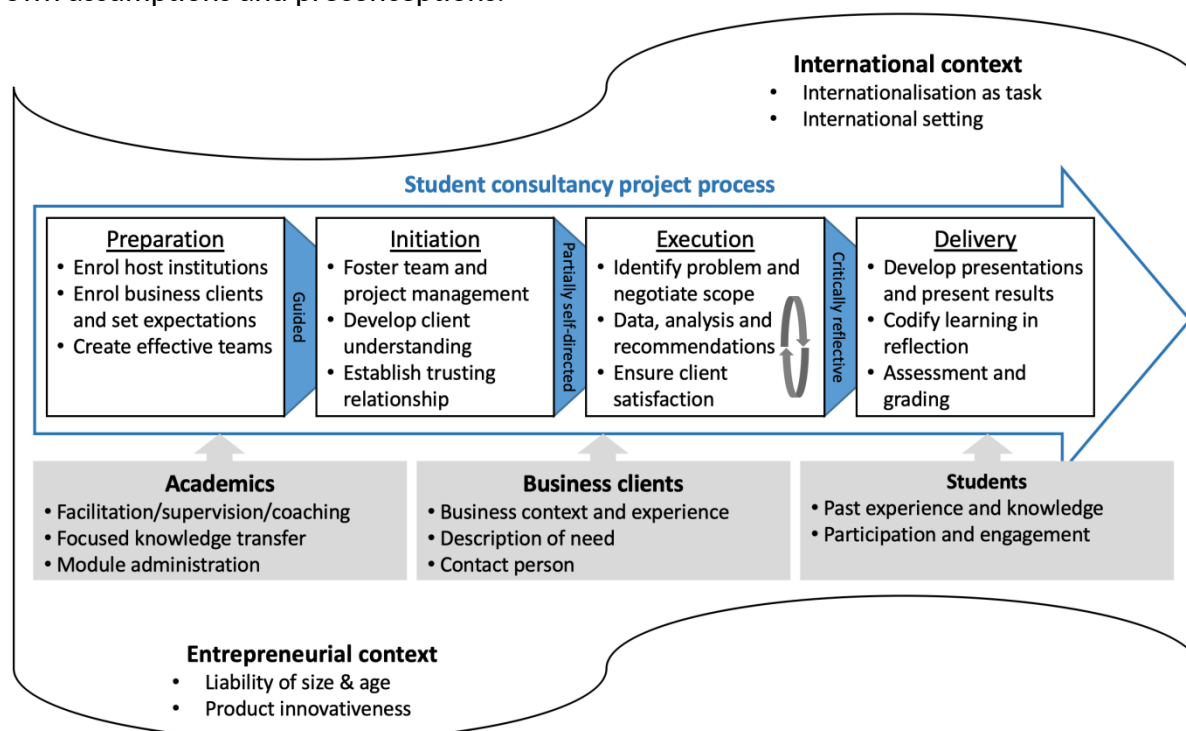


Figure 1: Student consultancy project process

#### 2.3.1 Setting and context of consultancy projects

Academics can prepare student consultancy projects differently, impacting execution and learning. A first differentiation concerns whether projects are executed within a service organisation or as a module. In a service organisation, students are usually paid for their work but also take on more responsibility to execute projects, such as client communication (Cooke & Williams 2004). When deciding on an in-module design, universities can decide on semester-long or much shorter projects. Traditional consultancy projects deal with clients comprehensively and holistically over longer timeframes, with much supervision and regular deliverables for feedback. On the other hand, micro projects solve a narrow project for a client within a short timeframe, usually only including one deliverable at the end (Heriot et al. 2008). In short programs with higher work intensity, academics need to provide students with sufficient time for work but also provide regular feedback. Academics usually invite

businesses to contribute problems to the module and form student teams. However, especially in service organisations, this process may also be done by the students themselves (Thomas & Busby 2003; Cook & Belliveau 2006; Teckchandani & Khanin 2014).

Academics need to calibrate initial objective(s) of the project at this early stage as action learning can only take place when students can learn from each other and are engaged with meaningful projects (Edmonstone 2002; Marsick & O'Neil 1999). Examples of meaningful projects that students might work on are business and marketing plans, business model development for new product/service introduction, achieving objectives with limited resources, and considering multicultural potential markets (Heriot et al. 2008; O'Leary 2017). In addition, it is suggested to create a level of urgency and intensity for students to experience conditions that emulate pressure for fast decision making, flexibility, adaptability, and the ability to derive to decisions and propositions using often limited data and bridging different opinions (Fitch 2011; Canziani & Tullar 2017). These requirements can be implemented by focusing projects on international entrepreneurship, which require students to aid a young, small, and innovative company on internationalising their product. Resources and previous experience in such companies are scarce, commonly referred to as liability of age and size. Moreover, their innovative products' success is highly uncertain (Zimmerman & Zeitz 2002). Internationalisation can be implemented in an international setting, helping foreign companies enter the students' home market. Additionally, student teams might be intercultural themselves (Joham & Clarke 2012). The impact of this entrepreneurial and international context on learning outcomes and teaching practice is explored throughout this paper along the consultancy project process.

### 2.3.2 The consultancy project process

Consistent with action learning, the consultancy projects are initiated by academics providing teams with a brief describing the client's problems and needs. Facilitating the process, academics need to develop teams and make procedures clear. Developing an initial understanding of their clients, academics need to direct students to execute initial research into their client and allow students to establish a trusting relationship with the client's contact person (Cook & Belliveau 2006; Marsick & O'Neil 1999).

In an iterative cycle, students execute the projects by (re)defining their problem, generating and analysing data to make recommendations, and communicating to ensure client satisfaction. Facilitating this process, academics are required to ensure the scope is sufficient for the intended learning, and that the team remains engaged and motivated to address the client's needs. Students pursue original research and will develop solutions for their clients. Thereby, they rely on their past experiences and previously acquired knowledge but will also need to expand their knowledge. During this process, team members challenge each other with academics facilitating these group dynamics and providing directions for further learning. While directions for research should predominate within the action research pedagogy, academics may use traditional lectures to a limited extent to focus on transferring relevant factual knowledge. During the analysis of the material, academics supervise and coach students to form and conceptualise their research findings and recommendations, ensuring that the team members share understanding and progress as a team. Students communicate preliminary results to their client, who provides feedback on it based on their context and previous business experience. This iterative process concludes when preparing a final presentation for clients (Cooke & Williams 2004; Cook & Belliveau 2006; Ardley & Taylor 2010; Teckchandani & Khanin 2014).

After completing the project, the students deliver their solution using a final report and presentation to their client, which are graded by academics. Comments from academics and clients made during the presentation, and structured feedback from the academics on the marked work, guide students for reflection. Such a reflective piece of coursework aims to codify and internalise learning by deepening learning and understanding, integrating experience with previous knowledge, thereby fostering students' development as professionals (Cook & Belliveau 2006; Heriot et al. 2007; Fitch 2011).

### **3. Methodology**

Exploring the impact of an international entrepreneurship context on student learning and required teaching practice in student consultancy projects, we adopt an interpretivist perspective using qualitative methods. An example of a module at [the authors' university] is provided below based on our activities and reasoning when executing the module as academics, as well as interviews with clients and students.

#### 3.1 Research context and sample

The presented module is a four-week long mini consultancy project on the postgraduate courses MSc Entrepreneurship and MSc Management and Innovation & Enterprise<sup>1</sup> scheduled as the final module of the second trimester of a one-year, full-time, taught programme. The aim of the module was to provide students with the opportunity to apply their learned knowledge and skills in practice, simulating entrepreneurial commercialisation as close as possible. Five consultancy projects, provided by four foreign, entrepreneurial firms (Table 1), accommodated a total of 28 students working on the companies' internationalisation. All companies had a developed product or service with a presence on the French market and were seeking international customers. However, the international mode of entry differed for all companies, as well as the complexity and the level of innovation of the product or service. The module was partially executed at [the authors' university], the students' home university, but most client work was executed during a two-week visit to a host business school in France, in proximity to clients' location.

Students focused their studies either on entrepreneurship (12 students) or innovation and enterprise (16). A mixture of modules and seminars has previously taught them a wide range of topics including, among others, strategy, marketing, innovation, and operations.

The student executed the consultancy projects in phases:

1. In the first week, students received an introductory lecture outlining and initiating the module at [the authors' university]. During that week, students were expected to start with their initial research on projects and clients, plan their projects, and arrange a Skype call with their clients for the end of the week.
2. For the second and third week, students and academics travelled overseas to the host university. Their main tasks were executing the work for their clients in close collaboration with them. Furthermore, time was used to visit other local entrepreneurial companies

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<sup>1</sup> Although similar activities are organised for most of the postgraduate courses at [the authors' university], the activity has been decided by the programme leaders to be organised by subject area as the cohort of students has become too large to be managed at one location – more than 90 students took part at two different locations. In the past, we experimented with hosting all in one location, but the experience suffered significantly, especially regarding the ability to provide close supervision and coaching for each team.

that already internationalised, seminars on internationalisation, supervision, and cultural visits. The third week closed with the students' presentations.

3. Back at their home university in the UK, students would spend the fourth week writing a reflective piece of coursework on their consultancy experience and suggested solutions.

Students participating in the module were diverse in academic background and nationality, which is common for postgraduate courses (Joham & Clarke 2012). While some have completed business and management degrees as their undergraduate studies, this does not apply to all students. Other subjects, as diverse as photography and product design, were among the experiences of students. Similarly, some students have previous business experience from internships, family businesses, or as entrepreneurs. Students came from 12 different countries with India (15 students) and the UK (3) being the most common countries of origin. No student came from France, allowing this project to explore the impact of a different cultural setting on the achieved learning outcomes. However, students working with a US representative might overcome challenges relating to language and communication easier, while still facing challenges related to the cultural norms of the firm.

Company/project	International context (contact persons' background)	Clients' entrepreneurial context		
		Size (#employees, #business professionals)	Age (years on French market)	Uncertainty (product/service innovativeness)
A	French	10-20 employees including one business professional	≈ 5	High - B2B product for emerging market
B	French	10-20 employees including several business professionals	≈ 5	Medium - B2C product for established market
C1	French and US	>50 employees including many business professionals	≈ 15	Medium - B2B product for established market
C2				High - B2B product for established market, new market for the company
D	French	<5 employees including one business professional (not the contact person)	≈ 5	Low - B2B product for established market

Table 1: Overview of company and project context

### 3.2 Method

Predominantly, data on the five student consultancy projects was collected using semi-structured interviews with participating students and businesses. The researchers have interviewed the contact persons from the participating companies twice, with each interview lasting approximately ten minutes. At the beginning of the second week, after the companies met the students during their first day in France, company representatives have been interviewed to explore the objectives and expectations of the clients towards the consultancy projects. Additionally, it has been explored how these expectations relate to the companies' backgrounds. The second interview was conducted after the students' final presentation to explore the achievement of the clients' objectives, the satisfaction of their expectations, and the students' problems and achievements. From each team, two students have been interviewed for around 35 minutes after submitting their reflective coursework. To structure the interviews, students were questioned about their learning experience along the experiential learning cycle.



Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and then analysed using thematic analysis using the NVivo software. As suggested by Bryman and Bell (2015), an initial coding scheme was set up based on the conceptual framework presented above (figure 1). Such a framework-guided, qualitative analysis can be used to identify relevant contextual elements and develop new action plans (Ritchie & Spencer 2002), such as learning in an international, entrepreneurial context and teaching practice to effectively foster learning. Similar to the matrix coding suggested by Miles et al. (2014), transcripts were coded along two dimensions to determine the activities and influence of each stakeholder in each stage of the student consultancy projects process: for the project process, codes included preparation, initiation, execution, and delivery; for the projects' stakeholders, codes were students, academics, and businesses. In a second step, the items coded for each process stage have been reviewed to identify repetitions, similarities, and differences in the accounts of students and businesses (Bryman & Bell 2015). Thereby, the challenges, learning, and contextual elements could be identified, including the employed teaching practice and the students' reaction. This analysis is combined with a reflective account of what we as the academics did to design and execute the consultancy projects, providing further insights into the process.

#### **4. Maximising student learning through teaching practice in international, entrepreneurial consultancy projects**

The described consultancy projects provide students with an opportunity to utilise their knowledge and skills by proposing a path for commercialising an innovative product on a new market for an entrepreneurial company. Along the stages of the consultancy project process (figure 1), the international, entrepreneurial context allows students to learn from challenges, which need to be addressed by appropriate teaching practice to maximise cognitive, behavioural, and affective learning outcomes.

##### 4.1 Preparation challenge: enrolling host institutions, clients and students

Preparing the projects, academics are tasked with resolving administrative issues and coordinating client projects and student teams. A clear intellectual framework provides the direction for the design of the projects. In our case, international entrepreneurship gave us a platform to engage with challenging themes from two perspectives. The international perspective using international teams and foreign clients at a foreign location allows students to question their routines by experiencing a different way of working under conditions of unfamiliarity (Hay 2011). This allows them to update their self-perception and improves their intercultural communication, team working, consensus building and leadership skills (Weinstein 2012; Marsick & O'Neil 1999). Through the entrepreneurial perspective, students can understand prioritising and decision-making under resource constraints and under high ambiguity and uncertainty created by a lack of data and previous experience (Moberg 2014). Moreover, the proximity of entrepreneurs allows students to learn about the entrepreneurial process and to update their perception of their entrepreneurial skills (Chang & Rieple 2013; Cooper et al. 2004). Implementing this context requires the enrolment of a host university and foreign business clients before allocating teams as the basis for later learning (Table 2).

Preparation	Objectives	Learning outcomes	Teaching practice
6 months prior	Enrol host institution(s) – set the consultancy context	Sets basis for learning in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International, intersectoral, and interdisciplinary understanding</li> <li>• Factual knowledge acquisition through focused knowledge transfer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruit host university from existing networks</li> <li>• Select host with active engagement with businesses and academics capable of delivering relevant seminars</li> <li>• International entrepreneurship needs</li> </ul>
6 weeks prior	Enrol business clients and set expectations	Sets basis for learning in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning from relevant, meaningful business projects</li> <li>• Learning from client feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rely on host university to recruit clients</li> <li>• Utilise local network and previous clients</li> <li>• Thoroughly inform clients of process, objectives, and requirements</li> </ul>
3 weeks prior	Create effective teams	Sets basis for learning in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to learn from different viewpoints and feedback in engaged teams</li> <li>• Improved coaching and supervision through expertise feedback</li> <li>• Improved coaching and supervision on local culture</li> <li>• Develop knowledge seeking skill and ability to cope with uncertainty</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Combine different educational and cultural backgrounds, as well as performance levels</li> <li>• Match academic mentors to projects based on experience</li> <li>• Assign host academics/advisors, add local students to teams</li> <li>• Disregard students' experience when assigning projects to teams</li> </ul>

*Table 2: Framework for student consultancy project preparation*

The first decision to prepare the consultancy projects is the location of the projects creating the international setting. This is determined by establishing a cooperation with an international academic partner and business intermediary institution (e.g. chamber of commerce or business incubator) and might be limited by budget restrictions and locality – in our case, inside the EU to reduce travel burdens. The international context makes the administration of the projects particularly challenging (Porth 1997), dealing with issues including: group travel and accommodation; visa arrangements for international students; staff with relevant experience and capacity to travel and accompany students during the trip, maintaining a safe staff/student ratio; medical or dietary preferences information, emergency contact details, etc. These arrangements require a six-month preparation period actively engaging the course administrators, wider student support services (e.g. mental support, international students support), and academic contingency planning. For example, although students were informed and supported for their travel five months before the trip, some students did not get their travel visa on time or were not able to arrange childcare. They were transferred to an alternative module with equivalent content in collaboration with other programme leaders but miss valuable personal experiences in relation to dealing with cultural differences, overcoming difficulties such as the unfamiliar environment, or behaving and operating in a professional setting.

The primary criteria to choose the host institution is their active engagement with the local business community to generate the relevant projects for the consultancy experience, and guest speakers to deliver relevant seminars for focused knowledge transfer. Additionally, the host university should be practically able to receive and accommodate an extra cohort of students in parallel to their active programmes. Working with one partner institution repeatedly may thereby reduce the administrative burden on academics, as the same set-up of lectures and seminars can be used, and quality control is eased (Porth 1997).

Generating valuable and meaningful client projects is required as the foundations for learning in the process. Relying on the partner institutions and their ties with local businesses can reduce the challenges academics face in recruiting clients. Moreover, repeating the project at one location allows academics to build a network and utilise previous clients for the recruitment of new projects. For example, after the project was completed, client C said she

*“also work[s] for [a] cluster of IT companies. [...] So, for the next time I would be interested in receiving an email when there is the next mission, so I can forward the information to the clusters because it is a very value-added mission I think.”* However, the quote also indicates that the success of using that network is dependent on the students’ performance with the clients. A crucial factor for client satisfaction in management consulting are clear deliverables and expectations (Appelbaum & Steed 2005). The firms’ representatives might not be familiar with such activities, and the discussion should point out that the learning experience during the project, which is the purpose of the activity, is gradual and can derive even if the students do not achieve or partially achieve the original objective that they will set together with students. Therefore, good practice includes communication with the firms in addition to the local host to set expectations for the action learning experience.

Academics are challenged with creating teams that allow individual learning by engaging with a diverse set of teammates (Scott 2017). Teaching practice must thus include setting up interdisciplinary and intercultural teams composing of students that have studied different specialisations of business or other subjects and come from different cultural backgrounds. This allows teams to be able to observe differences in thinking due to education and culture, to learn from each other’s business knowledge (Johnson & Spicer 2006; Hay 2011), and fosters students *“teaching each other and learning from each other”* as one student (C2-S2) explains. These can be further increased by including a limited number of local students in the teams (one or two students per team) from non-business disciplines, increasing the cultural mix and interdisciplinary understanding. Based on previously achieved grades, balanced teams should include different individual performance levels, which allows each team to function efficiently. We find that the best performing members usually take the role of team leaders, with learning in interdisciplinary teams increasing with the motivation gained by such a leader (Edmondson 2003). Our experience confirms this research. In previous years, for example, a team composed of the best-performing students alone showed to be rather dysfunctional as members were too convinced of their approach and conflicts aroused continuously. Although students (A-S1) *“would have liked a client that I, what’s the word, they’re in my field of practice”*, unfamiliar topics require students to develop an understanding of their own knowledge and to seek out new information, which is part of the desired cognitive, affective, and behavioural learning (Johnson & Spicer 2006; Brownell & Jameson 2004). Therefore, teaching practice should also include the allocation of teams to projects without consideration of the students’ professional background and experience.

The ability of academics to supervise and coach students by providing adequate feedback and being able to challenge students requires matching academics to projects based on their experience. The importance of facilitator expertise is accepted in action learning (Scott 2017; O’Leary 2017), and extends not just to subject knowledge. While home academics contribute factual knowledge, we find that academics and advisors from host institutions can help students adjust to local business practices as one student (B-S1) explains: *“I really liked the French mentor, who had the look on the, like the French way of doing things.”* Therefore, host academics from the host institutions should be recruited as mentors during its enrolment and allocated to the teams.

#### 4.2 Initiation challenge: client and student engagement

Initiating the consultancy projects in the first week, students are presented with the module’s introductory overview lecture and their clients’ brief on Monday. The ability of the teams to

start dynamically is affected by cultural differences, the students' background and level of knowledge, the habit of passive learning, the level of their understanding concerning their client's case, and the students' personal performance expectations. Moreover, adjusting to self-directed learning is a problem faced by many students new to action learning (Lawson et al. 1997). Therefore, academics need to improve team collaboration, direct students' effort to understand their projects, and help them communicate with their client before teams are able to work more independently (Table 3).

Initiation	Objectives	Learning outcomes	Teaching practice
Week 1, Day 1	Foster team and project management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cognitive learning on project, team and client management</li> <li>• Affective learning regarding own behaviour and its impact on other team members and clients</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instruct directly on project and client management</li> <li>• Use teambuilding exercises and reflection to strengthen teams</li> </ul>
Week 1, Day 2-4	Develop understanding of clients' business model, industry, sector and problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gradual behavioural learning to adjust to uncertainty, and to seek new information under self-direction</li> <li>• Develops students' information generation skills using primary and secondary sources</li> <li>• Develops students' sense-making and problem structuring</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initiate projects by providing briefs and allowing research time, highlight the ambiguity of briefs and need for research</li> <li>• Indicate where to find relevant secondary data, ask students to generate primary data using home customers</li> <li>• Instruct to achieve specific deliverables to initiate students original work, ask to present their clients' business and needs</li> </ul>
Week 1, Day 5	Establish clients' trust/confidence in students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding development of trust in relationships</li> <li>• Improved learning due to better client information and feedback</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stress importance to show understanding of client's business and professionalism during the call</li> </ul>

Table 3: Framework for student consultancy project initiation

Many students are not familiar with self-directed learning and consultancy projects as the education system in their home countries might not support such experiences, as one student (C2-S2) describes when asked about challenging their client's propositions: *"it was my first consultancy project, so... and speaking for the other students, other group members, as well, we were not aware that you could do that, it was a first-time process."* While this presents the chance to learn about project management and consulting, students require input from academics on project, time, and client management. Initiating project work, students are presented with lectures for focused knowledge transfer and tasks involve more direct instructions from academics, for example, on identifying the client's real problems and communicating professionally.

Similarly, because students might not know each other and diverse teams have been set-up by academics, students might not be readily able to work together effectively. As Yeadon-Lee (2013) describes, high diversity with different perspectives may not always be utilised as a learning opportunity but can also be destructive to some members' engagement. Student interviews show that team management remains an emerging issue for students throughout the process due to intercultural habits and different performance expectations. Due to the intensity of the work, effective team management is required (D-S1), providing an opportunity to develop intercultural communication and team-working skills. Thereby, students need to be aware of team roles to develop their intercultural and team working skills as one student learns (B-S1): *"But I think like in the culturally diverse team, where there are different characters and different people, you should set [between us] the roles of the team more [clearly]. [...] for example, ask [teammates] about their preferences of working and so*

on [...], where there are different cultures you should spend more time on team building and integration [with] the team.” Developing this understanding to ensure effective teams, teambuilding activities are utilised to familiarise the students with another to facilitate their future working relationships. During these activities, such as small constructions under time pressure, students are asked to observe the behaviour of their teammates and themselves, leading to affective learning through reflection. Doing so before students work together more intensively on the actual project can help them find their role in the team and develop working practices that make them effective together.

Developing an understanding of their clients, students are tasked with initial research. This is initiated by providing students with the clients' brief, covering company information such as the company name, a description of the central business activity, the number of employees, and a contact person with contact details. Regarding the clients' problems, the forms 'nudged' the firms to describe problem-briefs on areas such as new product introduction or market segmentation. Furthermore, the form asked for a description of the main problems and obstacles from previous experience, and a description of their main priorities and objectives to be achieved.

However, students tend to criticise briefs for providing too little information on company products. Especially for client C, students mentioned that there was a “*lack of information provided by the company*” (C2-S2) “*and what the products are*” (C1-S1). This lack of understanding seems to result from a combination of the product's innovativeness and the students' backgrounds as one student (C1-S1) acknowledges: “[...] *our company was more based onto technology, but we did not know a lot about [that] technology.*” While students ask that briefs are “*verified*” and “*relevant*” (C2-S2), academics should not interfere with client briefs too much because it is part of the students' learning experience to inquire and develop an understanding for their client. Rather, such issues present a chance to develop students' self-directed learning skills. Students should be allowed to become familiar with the company's context on their own terms and seek new information to develop a habit of self-directed learning (Johnson & Spicer 2006; Brownell & Jameson 2004). Students must be made aware of the limitations of the briefs and should be encouraged to build their understanding gradually by combining individual research, group discussions, and client communication, which is an essential part of the consultancy role and are behaviours developing as part of the experience (Fitch 2011).

Implementing this in practice, the entrepreneurial and international setting makes executing initial research on companies particular challenging: Due to the international context, company information might only be available in foreign languages (D-S1). Similarly, library subscriptions might only be available for home data and hinder background research further. The entrepreneurial context makes research on the clients more difficult. Because the companies are small and new, company databases are usually not covering them or with only minimal information. If the product is particularly innovative and new, market research might also not be available (A-S2, A-C) and students need to use broader information to trigger an understanding for their case. These challenges should be used to develop students' information gathering skills using a variety of secondary and primary data. While students utilise online searches to gather information about the company and product (C1-S2), they should be encouraged to use industry and company databases available via their library to collect market research. Such resources availability (e.g. industry, company, and scientific databases) is essential at this stage and students should receive an introduction from library

staff making them aware of appropriate databases and encouraged to experiment to find valuable information. Additionally, it is essential to have an academic team that can provide insights and prompt students to relevant directions, without handing the answer to students (Gibson & Hughes 1987; Scott 2017). Where possible, students are also asked to generate their own data and talk to potential home customers, as one group has done during their first week (D-S2), generating original insights into the market.

Due to students' habit of passive learning, small-scale tasks with pre-specified deliverables, one-to-one meetings with their supervisors, and presenting to the other groups for discussion can be used to initiate their work. These activities felt essential for guiding and engaging students further (A-S2). Deliverables during the weeks could include using the business model canvas to understand the client holistically (Osterwalder & Pigneur 2010), or the three levels of product to understand the product better (Kotler & Armstrong 2010). Similarly, identifying the company's resources and capabilities, or a PEST analysis might provide insights into the company and its environment that are useful in the students' later work (Grant 2016).

Additionally, students are tasked with appointing a team representative that will handle communication with the client and supervisors, and organising the first communication with their client on Skype by the end of week one. Difficulties arise due to busy schedules with delays on responding (B-S1), possibly because students initiate the communication late in the week. While students can usually clarify their first impressions of the product, business, and problem, they often have very high expectations for the initial Skype meeting. One student (C1-S2) says that the client was *"answering in a generic form and they didn't explain their product well enough to understand"*. Similar, another (C2-S2) explained that they were able to *"[get] more clarity when we met the company representative physically."* As indicated, students and clients attribute this lack of clarity partially to the medium, which is necessary due to the international context. Client D for example, explains that the Skype conversation *"was a little difficult for me because I didn't understand the different accents."* However, students reflecting on these points note that later Skype calls were much better, as one student (D-S2) describes: *"So by the second time we spoke on Skype which was after the first meeting in person, things were a lot more relaxed."* A student (B-S2) explains this by having to establish trust and confidence: *"I feel like they didn't trust us, or they didn't think that we could do a good thing."* Building trust and confidence, the student explains, they *"showed them that we had a good knowledge of the product and why we are doing [a particular proposition]."* While noticing the importance to build trust in retrospect is a valuable learning experience, building trust is essential for the duration of the project too. For example, while the information was not crucial to the project, a student (A-S2) felt that their client, when asked questions, *"...tried to be as helpful as they can. However, there we [had] some questions that they were not willing to answer."* Students should thus use the Skype call to make a good first impression on their client, behaving professionally and utilising their knowledge from preliminary research. While these calls may not result in the most productive meeting to obtain information, they are important to establish rapport between the students and clients, and underline the importance of a trusting relationship.

#### 4.3 Execution challenge: producing a value-adding proposition

Entering the second week, the students have an initial idea about their clients and task. In the following two weeks, they execute and deliver their tasks to solve the clients' problem. This is done in iterations of redefining the problem and scope, gathering and analysing data to

make recommendations, and ensure the recommendations suit the client's ability (e.g. resources and capabilities) of delivering them.

Execution	Objectives	Learning outcomes	Teaching practice
Week 2, Day 1	Establish clients' problem and negotiate projects' scope	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop understanding of business problems and their identification</li> <li>• Foster negotiation skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arrange a flexible meeting between the clients and teams</li> <li>• Encourage students to integrate own interest in tasks to increase engagement</li> <li>• Ensure project achieves clients wishes and is value-adding</li> </ul>
Week 2, Day 2-4 & Week 3, Day 2-3	Preliminary data generation, analysis, and recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behavioural learning of information finding and generation skills</li> <li>• Affective learning on own capabilities and knowledge, as well as when to ask for help</li> <li>• Development of critical thinking skills</li> <li>• Cognitive and behavioural learning of creative and thought structuring techniques and tools</li> <li>• Allowing to learn from own experience and reflection rather than from academics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage students to generate primary and secondary data</li> <li>• Encourage asking clients for data and potential sources but stress the need to verify the clients' suggestions</li> <li>• Provide relevant seminars and company visits prompting the use of theories and examples for practical recommendations</li> <li>• Encourage creative techniques and suggest tools for thinking</li> <li>• Supervise efficiently allowing ample time for work</li> </ul>
Week 2, Day 5/ Week 3, Day 1	Ensure projects' direction satisfies clients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to gather feedback and learn from business experience</li> <li>• Cognitive learning of entrepreneurial context and possibilities</li> <li>• Recognise differences between one's own and other's background and knowledge</li> <li>• Behavioural learning of international communication skills</li> <li>• Foster critical thinking skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage students to communicate milestones at any point to verify results with clients' experience and context using channel they see fit</li> <li>• Arrange a second meeting with clients to present students' findings, ensure clients' satisfaction with the direction of work and clients' understanding of terminology</li> <li>• Ensure students remain objective and independent while satisfying client</li> </ul>

Table 4: Framework for student consultancy project execution

After clarifying their questions when meeting their clients physically on their first day abroad, students should be able to redefine the project in a way that makes an ambitious and valuable contribution to their client but is also achievable and realistic for the project's timeframe. In our experience, most problems arise from tasks being defined too narrowly by the clients, indicating that they require students to follow the clients' own preconceptions. Such tasks often restrict students' experience, the clients patronise students, so their propositions confirm their initial pre-conceptions. Client A wishes, she would not have *"lead them on so much towards what we already know."* In fact, one student (A-S2) finds that *"at the start, from meeting the client, [...] she was quite prescriptive."* Furthermore, too narrowly defined projects might result in changing objectives during the duration of the project. As a student (C1-S1) noted *"they asked us for certain things, and we just targeted those things. But at the end, we also targeted other things"* as the client proposed additional tasks during the process. If they and the company had defined a broader task at the beginning, it would have been *"more convenient"* for the team as it would have *"save[d] us time and [enables us to] collect more data"*.

For optimal learning, the task should neither be too narrow, nor too broad (Edmonstone 2002; Jonassen & Hung 2008). Overcoming this narrowness and providing an independent perspective, academics can intervene by asking students to select additional tasks that fit to the demands of their client. Adding their own objectives makes tasks more meaningful for students and increases their engagement with the projects (Raelin & Coghlan 2006; Albers

2008; Scott 2017). Doing so, students should be asked to question business owners, developing their critical thinking skills (Sonfield 1981; Canziani & Tullar 2017), as they may not be aware of the possibility to incorporate their own interest in projects. Therefore, seeing the bigger picture is something that academics need to encourage as part of their teaching practice. A student working on client C (C1-S1) describes that a mentor *“helped us to widen our perspective”* and a student working on client B (B-S2) describes this process as: *“[the mentor] told us ‘don’t only depend on the client, because the client can be having his own view.’ So, then we started [...] after like two or three days after we went there. So, then we looked onto our own aspects as well. And then we looked at the synergy of it.”*

Generating data to inform their solutions is challenging in an international, entrepreneurial context. For example, client A notes that while she would have liked the students to obtain primary data, it is *“very hard to do within our sector, because it’s often difficult to get people speaking to you.”* This may apply to most business-to-business products and contexts. However, students working on consumer products can obtain primary data easier, which was highly appreciated by client D. Similarly, secondary data may not be available. For example, a student (A-S2) notes that due to the product’s innovativeness, market research may not be available on industry databases. The international context challenges students’ data generation further when database subscriptions are only available for certain countries (B-S1): *“We weren’t able to find the data on 15 countries out of this 50.”* However, students admit they might not have been able to find the relevant information (A-S2): *“there would have been data that we found difficult to locate.”* These challenges provide students with an opportunity to develop their information seeking skills and raise awareness for problems that can occur in market research projects (Humphreys, 1981). Academics should utilise their expertise and experience to direct students’ search for information, but it is also the students’ tasks to ask for advice, as client A noted: *“They probably struggled right from the start, and I would have loved to help more, but I didn’t know what they needed.”* This is part of the affective learning, as students acknowledge their own capabilities and areas of improvement (Brownell & Jameson 2004). Rather than instructing student groups to use specific databases, students should be expected to recognise their lack of information and seek advice from academics and clients where necessary (Gibson & Hughes 1987). However, similar to defining the problem, students should be encouraged as part of academics’ practice to look beyond the information provided by companies, as students confirm (C2-S2): *“[The client] had given us a list, but then after we did some more research online, we found a few more competitors which were in the same industry.”*

After collecting data from different sources, students need to analyse it to generate solutions for the clients’ problem. However, finding theory and appropriate methods to analyse data is found rather difficult as a student (A-S1) illustrates: *“when we had provided all this information, we thought were really useful sources [...], we were then at a bit of a standstill as to where to go beyond that point.”* Academics need to intervene and *“present a little bit of theory, possibly that is specific to our kind of task”*, steering students to relevant factual knowledge as a form of cognitive learning. As sources of theory, students were presented with four academic seminars during the two weeks covering country entry modes, cultural differences, presenting to an international audience, and attracting finance. Especially the first three seminars helped students to find appropriate theories for their analysis. For example, students from group B used Hofstede’s (2011) cultural dimensions to describe countries, which was covered in the cultural seminar during week one and touched in the



presenting seminar in week two. Students working on client C used the theory too. In another seminar, a student (C2-S2) was *“able to learn about [the] Uppsala model”* and used it to select entry modes. However, no student referred to the financing seminar as it was scheduled a day before the mock presentations, leaving little time to incorporate information from the session in project work. Thus, scheduling the seminars during their first week of execution would give students more time to internalise the knowledge and apply it. Additionally, this also demonstrates the students’ inability to consider the integration of wider knowledge that they have received in their previous studies, and concepts that have learned from different modules.

Based on this combined knowledge, students might then use creative methods and examples of other cases to generate potential solutions. All groups point out that they *“brainstormed”* as a student (C2-S2) says. Students (D-S2) looked for *“random bits of information that, they were [seemed] completely irrelevant to what we’re doing, but sparked ideas for really good additions”*. Academics can help students to find these examples and potential solution using relevant company visits (Porth 1997). During their stay, students have received a company presentation covering their business scale-up and visited two companies in the technology sector that internationalised successfully. However, students instead looked at examples of companies they have identified themselves showing they are developing self-directed study skills by seeking relevant examples (Brownell & Jameson 2004); the visits have received somewhat discouraging feedback and often felt destructive to students’ work. A student (C2-S2) describes that visits need to be more selective and the international context reduced their effectiveness due to language barriers.

After developing solutions creatively, students need to align all of their propositions, with some groups using mind-maps (B-S1, C2-S2). Similar to theory, students still require some input from academics and have not become fully autonomous yet. Thus, academics must decide as part of their practice, which thinking tool is most appropriate to cover, as students seem likely to utilise these in their work. In our case, students were given materials on using mind-maps in the initiation week as part of their project management session, and they were required to draft one for their reflective coursework.

Besides making sure suggestions fit together, students need to ensure that their propositions are suitable for the company, making them aware of the limitations and context of entrepreneurial companies. For example, due to the liability of size, a student (D-S2) proposes that using wholesalers is not feasible for their small client as *“with wholesalers, it was a lot of bulking. So, they have to send a lot of products, it’s a bigger risk”*. Ideally, students meet or call their clients at the end of the first week and at the beginning of the second week to present ideas and confirm the validity of directions and priorities. Especially when the company has previous experience, students should also make sure that *“it’s at least aligning to the sum of the findings which the client had done earlier”* (B-S2). Students generally prefer such experiences as it eases the identification of inappropriate ideas and allows them to learn from the businesses (C2-S1): *“Because if they had already had some experience on what not to do, then it’ll be easy for us also.”* However, in an entrepreneurial context, students cannot rely on such experience (Kuckertz 2010). Here academics need to challenge solutions sufficiently before clients are informed or presented to, as another student describes (C2-S2): *“as a group, it does make [sense], but since we [discussed with our] tutors, we had to research more specifically to what we could actually and practically [make] work.”*

Another challenge for students is, again, the danger of narrow-thinking clients. A student from client B argues: *“Some clients are so stubborn, [...] what I thought was if [the] client is so stubborn, [...] I will go more towards the client side. But definitely I’ll tell the client, if the client is going on the wrong way, because I don’t want to [...] make my image wrong.”* There is thus the risk of students being too pre-committed to what the client already knows and wants. Within an entrepreneurial context, our experience shows that this is especially true when founders are the contact persons of the students due to the small company size. These are often very convinced of their businesses and emotionally tied to it (Sonfield 1981), and students tend to reconfirm their views. Similarly, a student working on client D (D-S2) says they initially took their client at face value but then needed to *“double check what they were saying.”* Here, academic practice includes intervention when students do not recognise this situation themselves yet and require advising the students to remain objective and independent, presenting the facts and not opinions, and thereby developing critical thinking skills (Canziani & Tullar 2017).

The entrepreneurial and international context also affects the communication with clients. Especially when students work with clients that have no business background, they need to educate the contact person beforehand. Business terminology and concepts should be explained by students in discussions with the client, so presentations can focus on the students’ solutions without jeopardising the client’s understanding. This requires students to be aware of their own and other’s knowledge, which is part of the affective learning when engaging with clients and in interdisciplinary teams (Edmondson 2003). Similarly, because of language barriers, students have to find a communication medium that works efficiently. Due to the limitations of Skype calls described above, the students working on client A and client B preferred face-to-face communication because they believe to appear *“a lot more credible”* (A-S2) and clients are *“more open”* (B-S1). Other students preferred communicating via email as it allows more preparation and thinking about the questions in advance (C2-S2). This illustrates that students were able to develop their communication skills throughout the process and selected channels that suited them and their client’s preferences. However, due to the liability of size, clients were not always readily available. For example, the student preferring email communication notes that *“we had two working days in-between each email.”* Similarly, other groups were aware of their clients’ time pressure (A-S2): *“when [communicating] by e-mail, it’s quite short. So, they’re very precise questions and answers. So maybe if we saw them a little bit more, if we had a little bit more time maybe, to be able to discuss.”* Instant messaging may have formed the students’ expectations of prompt replies. Research shows that students’ frequent use of instant messaging causes a lack of professionalism (Galluch 2018). The quick responses in everyday smartphone communication may cause them to assume that the same applies to communication with business professionals. While students should be able to select the communication channels that they find most effective, academics must ensure that sufficient client communication takes place. This might be done by setting expectations, a minimum level, and means of communication beforehand.

#### 4.4 Delivery and reflection challenge: codify and internalise learning

Two days before presenting, students finalise their research and start drafting their final presentations. After it is delivered to academics in a mock presentation, students present to

their clients. On returning to their home university, students were asked to improve their recommendations and codify their learning using a reflective piece of coursework.

Delivery	Objectives	Learning outcomes	Teaching practice
Week 3, Day 4-5	Develop presentation and present results to client	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Behavioural learning of communication and presentation skills, especially selling ideas and focusing on the most relevant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set slide and time limit for presentations</li> <li>• Provide feedback on content selection and presentation during a mock presentation with time for improvements</li> </ul>
Week 4, Day 1-5	Codify learning and improve recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affective learning by updating students' perception regarding improvements and difficulties</li> <li>• Behavioural learning developing students critical thinking skills questioning their own work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask students to critically challenge their recommendations using academic theory, rather than selling it to their clients</li> <li>• Ask students to explicitly mention their learning and reflect on their need to develop skills further</li> </ul>
Week 3, Day 5 & Week 4, Day 5	Assessment and grading	Sets basis for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focuses students on learning related to the two assessed tasks</li> <li>• Improves engagement of all students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use mix of graders not engaging in questioning of students</li> <li>• Evaluate students' recommendation, criticality, and theory use, as well as students' skill development plan</li> <li>• Adjust grades based on peer assessment</li> </ul>

*Table 5: Framework for student consultancy project delivery*

Presentations solve the clients' problem and commonly include the selection of attractive markets, market entry strategies, or aspects of product localisation illustrating the students cognitive learning in internationalisation and their ability to apply theory. Due to the intensity of the previous work, students are now challenged to be selective and direct about the content and message of their presentations, and thereby fosters their ability to identify the most relevant and convincing information (Robinson et al. 2010). Academics can increase this challenge by setting a slide and time limit of, in our case, seven slides in twenty minutes followed by ten minutes of questions from their clients. Because of the wealth of information and the time available to prepare presentations, initial drafts often require much further work. Using mock presentations the day before presenting to their clients, students can get valuable feedback leading to behavioural learning as they develop their communication and presentation skills (Robinson et al. 2010). Incorporating feedback requires ample time for improvements afterwards. It is often also necessary for academics to visit students at their hotel after dinner and check on the progress made by groups.

While the presentations challenge students to convince their client, they need to internalise their learning and integrate it with their existing knowledge, requiring reflection on the experience (Cooper et al. 2004). A week after delivering their final presentation, students are asked to submit a reflective report consisting of three parts: a comprehensive description of their team's proposition, its justification, and potential limitations and constraints; a mind-map illustrating the proposition's implementation; and an executive summary of the mind-map reflecting on the overall strategy. Students are asked to consider theories and models to justify and explain their approach. Using this format, students are first asked to consider their recommendations holistically but also critically reflect on it. They are then asked to illustrate how each step of implementation is aligned with their overall proposition. Students should also identify their learning from the project and provide an overview of necessary skill improvements with a development plan.

The grading and assessment for the presentations and the reflective report can be used to focus students on the learning outcomes of the two assessed tasks. Assessing the ability to convince clients with the most relevant findings of prior project work, students' presentations were graded based on the quality of their presentation, their recommendations, the process of building and maintaining client relationships, and the overall result. During the questions after presentations, academics observe the students' professional handling of the client's questions. Because projects are very diverse and uncertain (Thomas & Busby 2003), a mix of graders familiar and unfamiliar with each project should be used. Three academics have graded all presentations separately and agreed on a grade for each team in a meeting after the presentations. Supervisors may have pre-formed opinions on the students' work that should not influence the student grade on their final presentation. However, with in-depth knowledge of projects, supervisors can account for adverse conditions, such as a more difficult project or a low engaging client that external graders might not be aware of. Similarly, students can be focused on identifying their learning needs and challenging their previous work by assessing based on students' understanding of the context and detailed analysis, identification of learning and establishment of a development plan, critical use of theory, the support and justification of their recommendations, and their presentation of the report.

Moreover, grading and assessment can be used to incentivise all students to contribute to their teams. With different performance expectations, some students may rely on their group's work. This can partially be avoided by deriving individual performance grades based on group presentation grades and students' peer assessment. Each student should be asked to assess their teammates performance and engagement (Teckchandani & Khanin 2014). If all students contributed equally and as expected, they should all receive the overall group grade. Based on peer assessment and observation during group work, academics have a foundation to adjust individuals' grades upwards and downwards. It is vital to make students aware of this process before the projects' initiation because it serves as a motivating tool to ensure that no students are freeriding on their peers' work. However, as described above, motivational problems remain, and it might be necessary to fail individual students.

## **5. Discussion, conclusions and recommendations**

Along the stages of the student consultancy project process, we have shown the challenges and learning opportunities for students in an international, entrepreneurial context, and highlighted the required teaching practice to foster learning along the consultancy project process. These insights are condensed in a framework for academics to foster the identified learning outcomes. This framework implements the contribution of this paper: the relationship between student learning outcomes and required teaching practice along the consultancy process. The role of academics in action learning is critical for the success of action learning activities (Gibson & Hughes 1987; O'Leary 2017; Marsick & O'Neil 1999). While some authors have suggested potential for higher involvement of academics in projects (Teckchandani & Khanin 2014), students' independent learning experience needs to be maintained (Marsick & O'Neil 1999). Achieving this balance, we show that the level of academics' intervention needs to be adjusted along the student consultancy project process, rather than fixed throughout the process. While students require intervention at the beginning of the process to achieve cognitive and affective learning outcomes, the level of

intervention can be relaxed by academics when students develop their critical thinking skills and become more independent.

It has previously been argued that student consultancy projects, when implemented carefully, can foster students' employability and prepare them for management positions (O'Leary 2015). Businesses indicate that shortcomings of recruited graduates include lacking business and customer awareness, communication skills, team working, and technology skills (McMurray et al. 2016). Implementing the presented framework for the context of international entrepreneurship, students can realise cognitive, affective, and behavioural learning outcomes addressing employer's demands (Brownell & Jameson 2004; O'Leary 2015). Cognitive learning outcomes include deriving to realistic propositions based on limited sources of data, as well as learning to adapt their proposition fast to new information and theory, and by adapting and integrating their existing business knowledge. Thereby, their understanding of real business problems improves, and the innovative nature of entrepreneurial companies requires students to familiarise themselves with new technologies and business models. As part of affective learning, students develop an appreciation of other's perceptions and views due to the international and interdisciplinary setting. Recognising such differences, we have shown students' ability to communicate interculturally and across disciplines to improve their skill to challenge firmly held opinions after creating trusting relationships. Thus, behavioural learning includes the development of transferable skills such as intercultural communication, presentation, and client management skills, which addresses employers' concerns regarding customer awareness, communication skills, and team working. Especially in an entrepreneurial context, the burden to identify a business problem and potentially valuable contribution is placed on the students rather than the clients, improving the students' project and team management skills. Students are then required to develop solutions utilising limited data and experience, requiring constant critical thinking.

Thereby, cognitive and affective learning outcomes interact and form a basis for behavioural learning outcomes (Brownell & Jameson 2004). The framework implements the requirement of improved factual knowledge and self-reflection before skill improvements emerge. For example, a library introduction is scheduled for the introductory week providing students with information on available databases and information sources. Information seeking skills improve afterwards when students utilise these to solve their clients' problems. Similarly, factual knowledge on client management and affective learning through teambuilding exercises lead to improving communication and collaboration skills later in the project.

Besides indicating the learning from consultancy projects, this paper contributes to theory and practice by identifying the necessary teaching practice within the academics' roles of facilitation, supervision, and coaching; focused knowledge transfer; and module administration.

Regarding facilitation, supervision, and coaching, the initial set-up of the module is crucial. Effective teams have to be created and meaningful projects have to be sourced to facilitate the above learning outcomes (Edmonstone 2002; Peterson 2004). Academics can implement such by forming interdisciplinary, intercultural teams, potentially including host students from other subject areas, that are developed into effective teams using teambuilding exercises. Similar to McGill and Beaty's (2001) proposition for set leaders in business settings, academics need to start the activity with a more hierarchical approach using more guided

intervention, for example, by setting goals for student teams until students are used to the action learning method. During the project execution stage, however, this can be relaxed to a cooperative style of facilitation in which intervention only takes place if students in their team have not managed to coach each other. Academics thus refrain from guiding students' thinking and allow them to improve their work independently. Thereby, the students' learning experience and academic intervention are linked. While intervention is required to initiate cognitive and affective knowledge, for example, because students would not use teambuilding exercises by themselves, the development of behavioural skills allows academics to relax their interventions. Implementing this transformation, the framework can be used and updated for other areas and subjects. However, while McGill and Beaty (2001) propose that teams in business contexts can be fully autonomous and self-facilitate, we observe that no team becomes fully independent. Whether autonomous teams are possible in academic settings should be a subject of further investigation, for example, in projects with a longer timeframe than the described framework or with student groups with prior work experience.

This changing level of intervention also affects academics' focussed knowledge transfer. Students still rely to a great extent on the academics' input for theories, methodologies, and proposed tools for analysis and thinking, especially in the early stages of consultancy projects. However, especially when teams become more autonomous, they rely more on ideas sourced by themselves rather than brought in by academics. While this is in line with the cooperative style of facilitation (McGill & Beaty 2001), focused knowledge transfer in the above framework is difficult because academics must decide which knowledge to transfer in advance when the direction of projects is not fully known. A solution to this obstacle is to rely on rather general topics of, in our case, internationalisation, and provide more relevant directions to theory in supervision sessions with individual teams. However, this requires knowledgeable and adaptable academic supervisors and mentors, who are ready to react and adapt to the different needs of individual projects (O'Leary 2017). Additionally, students should be able to draw from a range of theories, limiting the presented framework to be used towards the end of courses and challenging traditional curriculum delivery in which factual knowledge is taught on term-long modules. Adapting the overall degree delivery framework for experiential learning in different course arrangements might also prove an interesting path for future research.

As noted in other international experiences, academics' administrative tasks increase substantially (Porth 1997). Using long-term partnerships, quality control and preparation are easier for academics, and clients can be used for projects repeatedly. However, it requires the businesses' satisfaction with the students' work, which can be achieved by, for example, clearly communicated deliverables and realistically set expectations (Appelbaum & Steed 2005). This presents another interesting path for research by investigating how participating businesses might benefit from such activities as only limited empirical work has been executed on the benefit for industry (see Sonfield 1981; Sonfield 2008; Grossman 2002).

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