



Realize the potential of Work-Study Master's Programme's Theses as a Bridge between Academic' Standards and Business' Expectations

A Belgian Case-Study

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Context: New Work-Study Master's Programs

- **Work-study** (“*alternance*”) master's programs recently authorized in French-speaking Belgium.
- UCLouvain initiated **three programs**:
 - Strategic Communication,
 - Management Sciences (Digital Transformation),
 - Accounting and Tax Expertise.
- Students spend **at least 40%** of their curriculum in a workplace.
- **Master thesis** is designed to be related to the experience within the company.



Problem Identification and Objectives

- First cohort of master theses showed significant **quality issues**.
- A **root cause** for the quality issues was established through a **mixed-approach** analysis to:
 - provide **relevant data** to explore potential actions in the context of reflecting on thesis formats and support mechanisms in UCLouvain's work-study master's programs,
 - identify **barriers and opportunities** to align theses with the expectations of three key stakeholders: students, companies, and academic institutions.
- **Short and long-term actions** are being taken to address it.

Mémoires Formalter_UCLouvain

Diagnostic et pistes pour le développement d'un format de mémoire et d'outils adaptés à l'alternance



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<http://hdl.handle.net/2078.1/298495>

- Zegwaard et al. (2023) **inclusive definition** of Work-Integrated Learning.
- Master theses as **a process**, on campus and in workplace settings, (Björck & Willermark, 2024), that includes Pre-WIL and post-WIL aspects (Ferns et al., 2025).
- Focus on the involvement of **three parties**: university, student, company.
- “**Employability**” as “challenge and change how work is conducted in a profession and in working life in general” (Björck, 2021; Björck & Willermark, 2024, p.3).
- **Science-Business Gap.**



“An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students’ discipline of study and/or professional development”
(Zegwaard et al. 2023)

Academic Supervisors' Perspectives

- Thesis = tool to **validate scientific & critical skills**
- Tensions in **supervision style** (autonomy vs structured guidance)
- Concerns about **workload & coherence** in practices
- Quality strongly depends on **company involvement**



Enquête auprès des organisations intéressées par l'alternance UCLouvain ☸

Cette enquête vise à mieux comprendre les besoins et attentes des organisations concernant la réalisation d'un mémoire par un étudiant en alternance. Les réponses obtenues permettront de mieux adapter le cadre et le processus des

Les étudiants en alternance et l'organisation

1. Accueillez-vous actuellement, avez-vous accueilli ou souhaiteriez-vous accueillir un étudiant en alternance provenant des masters suivants ?

Plusieurs réponses possibles

☐ Master 120 en alternance en communication stratégique (UCLouvain-HELHA)

☐ Master 120 en alternance en expertise comptable et fiscale (HELHA-EPHEC-UCLouvain)

☐ Master 120 en alternance en sciences de gestion, à finalité spécialisée en transformation digitale de l'entreprise (UCLouvain-UNamur)

2. Quelles compétences clés un étudiant en alternance devrait-il posséder en rejoignant l'organisation pour son stage ?

Veillez citer trois compétences clés

3. Quelles compétences clés un étudiant en alternance devrait-il posséder après avoir effectué son stage au sein de l'organisation ?

Veillez citer trois compétences clés

4. Comment valorisez-vous l'utilité d'un mémoire d'un étudiant en alternance portant sur votre organisation ?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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Inutile

Très utile

5. Selon-vous, qu'est-ce qu'un mémoire d'étudiant peut apporter à une organisation ?

Businesses Expectations and Obstacles

- Use of different scientific resources and a **positive opinion** of the usefulness of the scientific approach: reinforces the credibility of the results and facilitates decision-making or innovation.
- Businesses **value theses as practical, problem-solving tools**. Importance of actionable solutions and operational improvements.
- **Desired skills** acquired through the master's thesis?
- **Obstacles:**
 - time burden for tutors; lack of alignment between thesis topics and the concrete needs of organizations; confidentiality constraints and data access;
 - lack of clarity, understanding, collaboration and integration.

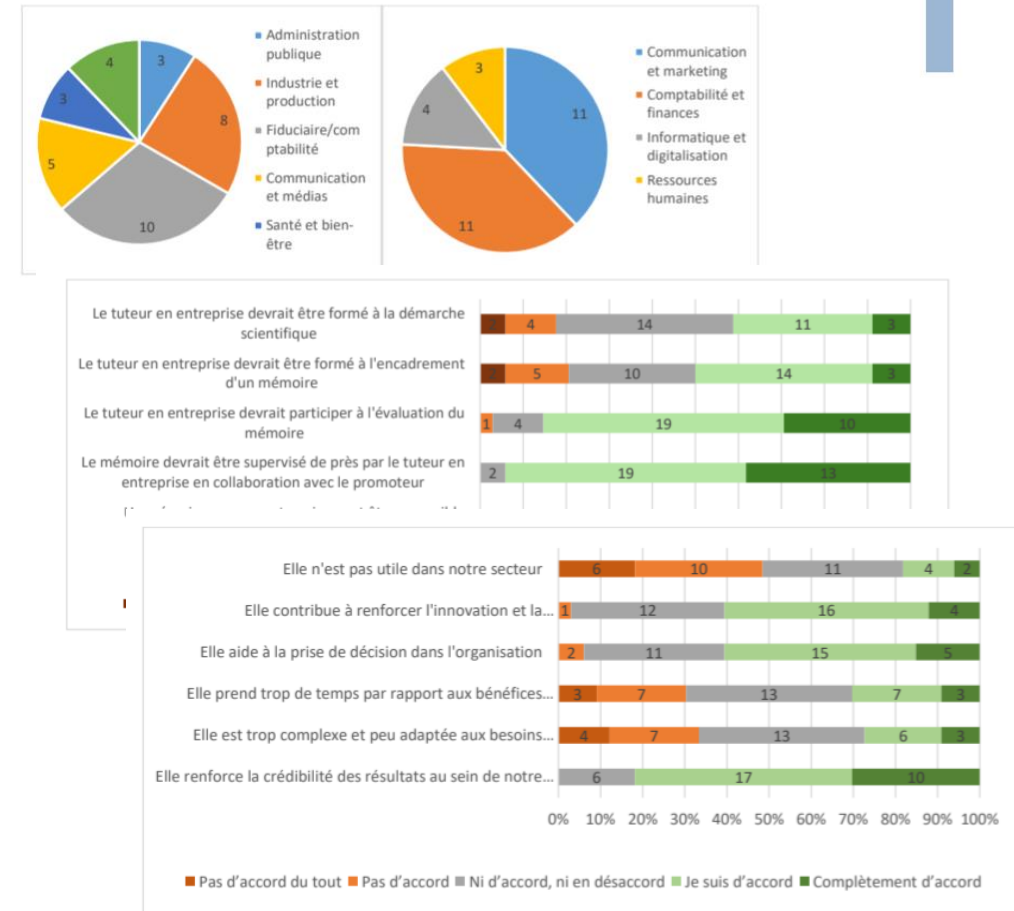


Figure 18 - Propositions sur la démarche scientifique

- Mixed feelings about **usefulness for career**
- Difficulty reconciling **academic rigor** with **company needs**
- Struggles with **organization & time management**
- Ask for **clearer communication, tools & peer support**



From Diagnosis to Action: Implementing Solutions in Work-Study Master's Theses

Three strategic axes of implementation:

1. Flexible and process-oriented thesis formats
 - Greater latitude in how students link their thesis to their workplace.
 - Adjustments to calendars and milestones adapted to alternating rhythms.
 - Ongoing reflection to evaluate the impact of flexible formats and incremental assessment.
2. Enhanced student support and methodological guidance
 - Pilot methodological seminars.
 - Collaboration with adapted services to develop tailored coaching sessions.
 - Integration of pre-thesis workshops to prepare students early in the process.
3. Improved communication and collaboration among stakeholders
 - Inclusion of thesis expectations in the company tutor guide.
 - Development of a vademecum for academic supervisors.
 - Tripartite meetings and exploration of shared spaces for topics and exchanges.



→ Next step: establish a sustainable evaluation and coordination mechanism to continuously adjust practices and strengthen the pedagogical bridge between academia and professional environments.

WIL theses = **critical negotiation space**
(university-students-businesses)

- **Challenge:** divergent expectations → need for shared goals and competencies
- **Solutions:**
 - Flexible formats (classical ↔ business-oriented)
 - Structured frameworks & co-construction of roles
 - Clear communication & earlier integration

Balance rigor, relevance, and student development → foster employability & support workplace innovation

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