

Reinventing Master's Theses as Work-Integrated Learning: A Multi-Stakeholder Approach

Sabri Derinöz, François Lambotte, Ingrid Poncin & Anne-Catherine Provost

UCLouvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

sabri.derinoz@uclouvain.be

francois.lambotte@uclouvain.be

ingrid.poncin@uclouvain.be

anne-catherine.provost@uclouvain.be

Introduction

How can master theses be work-integrated learning (WIL) experiences that can benefit both students and their host organizations while responding to academic standards? This question arose early in the development of work-study master's programs at a Belgian university, confronted with differing stakeholders' expectations. It led to the development of a study to understand stakeholders' needs and perspectives in order to develop an adapted master thesis process.

Recent developments in Belgium have allowed universities to create work-study master's programs ("masters en alternance"). Under the legal framework set by the 2016 Decree ("décret du 30 juin 2016 organisant l'enseignement supérieur en alternance"), only fields of study that lead to jobs in high demand, emerging professions, evolving careers, occupations related to sustainable development, or jobs linked to economic recovery can develop such program. In the early stages of developing such program in three fields (Strategic Communication; Management Sciences with a specialization in Digital Business Transformation; Accounting and Tax Expertise), UCLouvain, a leading Belgian university, was quickly confronted with yellow flags regarding the quality level of master theses. In the three work-study programs of UCLouvain's "masters en alternance", the thesis was first expected to be strongly related to the organization where the work-study occurs. It was set to be designed as a business project that would fit the canvas of a master thesis with a strong emphasis on the scientific research process, regardless of the epistemological tensions that could appear in some fields between scientific research and professional work (Morillon, Grosjean, & Lambotte, 2018). Eventually, the master theses from the first cohort did not meet the rigorous academic standards that were expected.

This situation led to several reflections: how to shape the master thesis to be a coherent WIL experience in a work-study program, that would meet stakeholders' expectations, whether it is the organizations, the students or the university? How to develop adapted tools and support for the student to create such master's thesis? In order to answer these questions, a two-step plan was conducted. It started with an analysis of the situation and of the stakeholders' expectations and needs. It resulted in a report that pictures master's theses in work-study programs function as a complex negotiation space between universities, students, and partner organizations (Derinöz 2025). Second, based on these insights, several experimentations on the change of the master's theses formats and on ways of supporting students are currently processed.

Theoretical foundation

We retrieved perspectives from the stakeholders to contribute to the changes that are currently being implemented to the master's thesis format and process. If one considers master thesis as at the intersection of businesses', students' and universities' needs and expectations, it can be considered as key point of the WIL in a work-study university programme. WIL is understood here in the broad definition brought by Zegwaard et al. (2023) of an educational approach involving three parties similar to the stakeholders mentioned above, with intentional and authentic work-focused experiences and a focus on the integration of theory with meaningful practice relevant to the student's academic and professional development (Zegwaard et al., 2023). Collaboration, communication and mutual understanding of respective roles of stakeholders can be considered as central to provide a functioning WIL (Winchester-Seeto, Rowe, and Mackaway 2013; Fleming 2015). When designed as a WIL experience, master theses can be thought of as a process, on campus and in workplace settings, (Björck & Willermark, 2024), including Pre-WIL and post-WIL aspects (Ferns et al., 2025). The "employability" of WIL can be considered as incorporating

the capacity to “challenge and change how work is conducted in a profession and in working life in general” (Björck 2021; Björck and Willermark 2024).

Although there were differences between programs that were part of the “masters en alternance”, in all cases, all three parties, university, student and company, were expected to be involved in the thesis process. A mixed methodology was used to understand stakeholders’ needs and expectations regarding the master thesis, in a holistic approach including documentary analysis, stakeholder in-depth interviews and focus groups, as well as a survey with partnering businesses.

Results and discussion

The data collected showed that the academic supervisors perceive the thesis as an essential tool for acquiring or validating, both concretely and symbolically, scientific (and other) skills learned at university. These skills may be seen as useful or irrelevant to partner organizations, notably due to a certain epistemic distance between academic methods and organizational practices. Depending on the thesis format and the way the research problem is framed, the thesis may be more or less compatible with professional activities while still meeting academic requirements. A thesis conducted within an organization can be perceived both as an opportunity (to access a specific field) and as an obstacle (critical distance).

Regarding thesis supervision, one of the major challenges identified is the balance between student autonomy and guidance. Some supervisors believe that students should learn to manage their project autonomously, while others advocate for a more structured follow-up. Certain supervisors also defend the idea of preserving their own autonomy in the way they supervise. The thesis conducted within an organization crystallizes questions related to the willingness and capacity to supervise, as well as the impact in terms of workload and follow-up.

For supervisors, students in work-study programs present a diversity of profiles, which impacts their approach to the thesis and their needs in terms of supervision. Discussions also touched upon the student's positioning, navigating between the expectations of the university and the partner organization, and how the respective roles should be defined and structured. Some supervisors emphasized that the quality of the theses depends largely on the involvement of the partner organizations and their tutors, which can vary significantly from one organization to another.

Several areas for improvement were raised by the supervisors, particularly regarding communication, project management learning, the development of appropriate tools, coherence in supervision practices, and better integration of the thesis into the student’s tasks within the organization.

On the business side, the tutors expressed both strong expectations regarding this type of collaboration and reservations linked to various obstacles. The competencies expected to be acquired through work experience are of different kinds, such as adaptability, autonomy, creativity, and communication skills, as well as organizational skills (project management, meeting deadlines), relational skills, technical skills, and knowledge of the professional environment. These are primarily competencies not directly related to scientific research methods, although some can be developed within the framework of a master’s thesis, such as autonomy, project management, and, depending on the topic addressed, knowledge related to the professional environment. It appears necessary to reflect on how these competencies can be articulated with those developed through the thesis process: Which competencies should be acquired during the thesis? Which should precede it? And to what extent should a thesis, in its various forms, serve as a space to develop these competencies? Organizations evaluate a thesis positively when it is conceived as a tool for applied analysis, responding to concrete business needs. They expect the thesis to help solve specific problems through in-depth analysis and the proposal of practical solutions. According to the respondents, a relevant thesis is one that demonstrates an understanding of the organization's challenges, proposes strategic directions or concrete improvements, and contributes to the implementation of operational changes or longer-term projects.

The respondents, who occasionally use various scientific resources, generally hold a positive opinion of the usefulness of the scientific approach, viewing it as a means to enhance the credibility of results and facilitate decision-making or innovation.

Among the obstacles identified to the development of a thesis useful to the organization, the following were mentioned: the time burden for company tutors, the lack of alignment between thesis topics and the concrete needs

of the organizations, and confidentiality constraints that can limit access to data. The thesis is sometimes considered too theoretical and not sufficiently adaptable to workplace realities.

Overall, tutors perceive the thesis positively and are willing to engage in the process but express a need for greater clarity, earlier integration of the thesis in the work-study trajectory, and more active collaboration with the university. The support of the company tutor is seen as essential to ensuring the relevance of the thesis, but this commitment often represents a significant burden for the tutors, particularly in terms of the time and involvement required.

Students approach the thesis with mixed feelings, seeing it as more or less useful for their professional career, and showing varying interest in the different thesis formats that could be articulated with their host organization. They highlighted various difficulties related to constructing a research problem compatible with the needs of the organization and the academic expectations and perspectives. The thesis process also involves complications in terms of organization and time management.

Key issues were also identified in the relationships with supervisors, tutors, and in the exchanges between the three parties. Some students advocated for strengthened support throughout the thesis process, without imposing additional constraints, particularly through clearer and more coherent information and regular exchanges, notably with peers.

Conclusion

The analysis revealed key themes reflecting the negotiation space between universities, students, and businesses. A main challenge identified is clarifying the objectives of WIL theses. Stakeholders expressed diverse expectations, ranging from purely academic to highly practical orientations. Academic supervisors emphasized critical and methodological skills, while businesses preferred applied analytical skills that directly inform organizational strategies. There is a necessity for a common understanding of competencies targeted by the thesis, distinguishing clearly between skills that are learned through the thesis process versus those that are evaluated or certified by it, and of the scientific outcomes that can be produced.

Stakeholders expressed significant interest in different thesis formats, from a more “classical” approach to a more “business project” oriented approach, while acknowledging that the link with the partner’s organization should stay central to the elaboration of a thesis in such work-study program. This link is seen as an opportunity to develop specific research and to respond to businesses’ needs. The variety of formats could alleviate epistemological tensions between academic rigor and business practicality for the different fields. Nevertheless, academic supervisors expressed concern about potential dilution of scientific rigor. Stakeholders highlighted the need for clearly structured frameworks that enable rigorous yet professionally relevant research. Supervision emerged as a central theme in stakeholder discussions. Students seek consistent, balanced support from both parties. The solutions discussed include establishing clear roles and responsibilities to prevent conflicts or confusion.

Master’s theses in WIL programs represent a critical negotiation space among universities, students, and businesses. Successful integration requires explicit recognition of stakeholders’ different needs, structured collaboration models, and clear, shared goals. A qualitative master thesis process as a WIL experience would benefit from finding the equilibrium between the divergent stakeholders’ needs and expectations.

While academia demands rigorous methodology and theoretical contribution, businesses seek practical and actionable outcomes, and students strive for personal and professional development. Solutions might be designed, taking into account specificities of each field, by thinking the articulation of a thesis format in organization that would be somewhere on the spectrum of master theses, from more theoretical to more business oriented approaches, with a thought on the whole process of a master thesis, including the learning that occurs from it and from the related supporting classes and tools. Additionally, improving communication between stakeholders and developing co-construction frameworks involving clear, defined roles for academic and business tutors can enhance the effectiveness of theses for all actors and minimize epistemological tensions.

Adopting the broader conceptualization of WIL advocated by Björck & Willermark (2024), the thesis can also develop broader *employability* attributes, such as critical thinking, innovation, and the ability to adapt theoretical knowledge to practical contexts, benefiting not just individual careers but potentially transforming workplace practices.

Björck, Ville. 2021. 'Taking Issue with How the Work-Integrated Learning Discourse Ascribes a Dualistic Meaning to Graduate Employability'. *Higher Education* 82 (2): 307–22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00650-y>.

Björck, Ville, and Sara Willermark. 2024. 'Where Is the "WIL" in Work-Integrated Learning Research?' *Studies in Continuing Education*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2024.2378718>.

Derinöz, Sabri. 2025. 'Mémoires Formalter_UCLouvain : Diagnostic et pistes pour le développement d'un format de mémoire et d'outils adaptés à l'alternance'. UCL-Université Catholique de Louvain. <https://dial.uclouvain.be/pr/boreal/object/boreal:298495>.

Ferns, Sonia J., Karsten E. Zegwaard, T. Judene Pretti, and Anna D. Rowe. 2025. 'Defining and Designing Work-Integrated Learning Curriculum'. *Higher Education Research & Development* 44 (2): 371–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2399072>.

Fleming, Jenny. 2015. 'Exploring Stakeholders' Perspectives of the Influences on Student Learning in Cooperative Education'. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education* 16 (January):109–19.

Winchester-Seeto, Theresa, Anna Rowe, and Jacqueline Mackaway. 2013. 'The Role of Stakeholders in Work-Integrated Education: Annual NZACE Conference (16th : 2013) : Strategic Direction in Cooperative Education'. Edited by Karsten E. Zegwaard. *New Zealand Association for Cooperative Education 2013 Conference Proceedings*, 41–44.

Zegwaard, Karsten E., T. Judene Pretti, Anna D. Rowe, and Sonia J. Ferns. 2023. 'Defining Work-Integrated Learning'. In *The Routledge International Handbook of Work-Integrated Learning*, 3rd ed. Routledge.