An experiential learning activity for integrating the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals into business education

Bonnie Amelia Dean, University of Wollongong, Australia*
Belinda Gibbons, University of Wollongong, Australia
Stephanie Perkiss, University of Wollongong, Australia

ABSTRACT

Purpose
The purpose of this paper is to evaluate an initiative designed to introduce business students to the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), through researching, reporting and reflecting on authentic corporate social responsibility (CSR) practices. Through this initiative, business students develop first-hand experience with organisational sustainability efforts through examining CSR reporting against the SDGs. Students are prompted to analyse organisational behaviour to form their own judgements, and increase awareness of social, ethical and environmental organisational practices.

Design/methodology/approach
An experiential learning activity is introduced that was developed in partnership with the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) network, and WikiRate, an online CSR reporting platform, employing the SDGs as a framework. In this paper, we present a pilot study on the initiative in order to examine and evaluate student perceptions of the activity, and their post-activity reflections on CSR and the SDGs.

Findings
This paper offers educators a practical way to meet curriculum challenges for teaching students the theory and practical applications of sustainable business

*Correspondence details and biographies for the authors are located at the end of the article.

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practices and CSR. Findings suggest that students develop a deep and critical understanding of CSR and the SDGs through first-hand experience with authentic data and reporting. It also indicates that students are learning about their own individual professional identity and stance on organisational sustainability practices.

**Limitations**
As a pilot study, the small sample size at a single institution is a limitation of the study.

**Implications**
This research has implications for designing learning to embed CSR and the SDGs in the higher education business curriculum through an experiential learning approach.

**Contribution**
This paper presents findings that support the value of experiential learning in fostering students’ deep, personal, ethical and social awareness, and the development of future sustainable practitioners.

**Keywords** Business curricula, Experiential learning, Sustainable development goals, WikiRate

**INTRODUCTION**
Higher education plays a crucial role in ensuring that the next generation of business graduates is responsive to global societal needs. These graduates will enter a complex workforce that is challenging, changing, and highly competitive, and therefore susceptible to ethical dilemmas. Practitioners in this environment may be confronted with global ethical issues such as inequality, abuse of human rights, child labour, exploitation of the environment, corruption, scandal, and discrimination. Therefore, in addition to operational decisions, practitioners around the world need to make critical decisions relating to enacting and communicating their stance on these issues through corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Since the late 1900s, key global issues that impact on CSR, such as world health, environment and education, have been brought into a public forum. The United Nations (UN) report, Brundtland Commission (1987), was the first global proposal uniting countries, governments and businesses to pursue deliberate sustainable action together in order to meet “the needs of the present without comprising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland Commission, 1987, p. 16). The introduction of the eight Millenium Development Goals (MDGs), and later the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) established a focus on the global issues of poverty, health and education, through which enormous advances have been monitored. For example, in the last thirty years, the world has: reduced extreme poverty by half; increased the number of school children in primary school in Sub-Saharan Africa; reduced maternal mortality by 45%; experienced successes in the fight against AIDS, Malaria and TB; and, seen overall improvements in health and
eduction in China, Asia and Africa (Business & Sustainable Development Commission, 2017). In turn, however, climate change and environmental issues remain a concern, with rising greenhouse gas emissions and substantial threats to forests, coral reefs and mangroves (Department of the Environment and Energy, 2017). The world is also experiencing its highest level of displaced peoples as a consequence of conflict, resulting in large numbers of refugees and migration (United Nations Refugee Agency, UNHCR, Edwards, 2017).

Given these substantial global threats and movements, increasing inequality and climate change, it is imperative that our future business practitioners demonstrate awareness and commitment to sustainable business practices. As such, discussion has intensified among professional bodies, employers and business educators on the need to develop deeper global ethical awareness in business graduates, through a set of skills and practices, including professional aptitudes towards ethics and corporate governance (Dellaportas, Kanapathippillai, Khan, & Leung, 2014; Gray, Bebbington, & McPhail, 1994; Jackling & de Lange, 2009). However, research into ethics in accounting education in Australia, for example, reports that despite the initial introduction of ethics into accounting programmes in the early 2000s, little development and recognition of ethics in the curriculum has eventuated (Dellaportas et al., 2014). If business educators continue to overlook the importance of teaching our future business leaders about the significance of corporate sustainability and CSR, it is likely that business education will become irrelevant to global needs (Weybrecht, 2017).

This paper outlines and evaluates an initiative to educate business students on sustainable business practices and CSR, through first-hand experience in analysing and reporting on real data against the SDGs framework. This initiative employed an experiential learning approach in order to facilitate students’ deep and relevant learning of the material through engagement in practical and authentic experiences. An experiential learning approach to university teaching has long been established in teaching and learning scholarship as an effective pedagogy for student learning (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993; Hunt & Chalmers, 2012; Moon, 2004). Experiential learning is often held in contrast to traditional didactic approaches that centralise the importance of memorisation of content (Moon, 2004). Instead, experiential learning involves the whole learner, his/her past experiences and future dreams, through the discovery of meaning from experiences, through which learning arises (Boud et al., 1993; Moon, 2004).

This paper begins with an overview of experiential learning in higher education, including its value in developing the whole learners, and their learnings of self, in relation to discipline knowledge. Next, the paper outlines initiatives that embed the SDGs into the higher education curriculum though the United Nations-supported network, the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME, 2018). The research in this paper is an evaluation of one of these PRME initiatives, designed through a tripartite partnership between the PRME network, a higher education institution, and an emerging not-for-profit and online CSR reporting platform, WikiRate. The paper will outline an analysis of this WikiRate project, before presenting findings that support the value of employing experiential learning for engaging students in personal, ethical and social awareness activities in the higher education business curriculum.
EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the broadest sense, experiential learning denotes learning through experience or learning by doing (Lewis & Williams, 1994). Theories of experiential learning arose in the mid-twentieth century through educational and social philosopher John Dewey (1933, 1938), and were later expanded on by others, including the seminal work by David Kolb (1984). Experiential learning is underpinned by constructivist theory, which considers the sociohistorical origins of knowledge and its appropriation through social mediation (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987). Learners construct knowledge through activities, building on what they already know, in processes driven by social interaction with the outside world (Wertsch, 1985) and facilitated through processes of reflection (Kolb, 1984; Mezirow & Associates, 1990).

In higher education, experiential learning was introduced in response to particular pedagogical issues with historical teaching and learning practices. For Fink (2003), this problem lay with the teacher. He observed tertiary teachers failing to design “learning goals that go much beyond an understand-and-remember type of learning” (Fink, 2003, p. xi). For Eyler (2009), this problem is associated with students. She argues that students arrive on campus with overly-simplistic ways of viewing ‘knotty problems’ and are likely to perceive their role as ‘learning right answers’ rather than understanding the complexities underpinning problems to explore multi-faceted solutions. Both proposed problems are self-perpetuating; a teacher designs content with little thought for students’ interpretation and meaning-making, while students receive (or don’t receive) information with little thought of making an interpretation or questioning its meaning.

Through experiential learning though, students do more than listen to lectures, read texts or answer exam questions. A curriculum that employs experiential learning techniques, engages students directly with phenomena, concepts and problems through productive activities and reflective tasks. Rubin (2000) classifies experiential learning as either field- or classroom-based activities. Field-based experiences, often known as experiential education or work-integrated learning, include internships, field studies, service-learning, and placements. Classroom-based experiential learning draws on principles of active learning and can assume multiple forms including role-playing, games, case studies, simulations, presentations, and various types of group work.

Embedding opportunities for experiential learning into the curriculum can lead to powerful academic, personal and social learning, as it supports learners and their agentic capacities to practice in a complex world (Eyler, 2009). Scholars argue that these agentic capacities do not arise through the experience itself, but through opportunities for critical reflection (Kolb, 1984; Moon, 2004). Reflection produces opportunity for metacognition, processes that enable us to make judgements on whether our actions or new learnings are consistent with our values and presuppositions so that we can (re)assess how we engage in the world (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Designing for challenging, conceptually-rich, context-appropriate and relevant reflection turns an experience into a learning experience (Eyler, 2009).

Graduates who are informed and who have had opportunities for critical reflection to question personal epistemologies and assumptions, are more likely to experience a smoother transition into professional practice (Billet, 2009). Such graduates are proactive and agentic learners, and have a deep awareness of the kind of professional they want to be. For higher education to shape our burgeoning professionals into the next generation of globally-minded citizens, we need to use purposefully-designed
experiential learning activities in the curriculum. Engaging in experiential activities will enable students to practise applying theory in context, use and question personal judgements, and reflect on activities that support meaning-making that can be transferred into future actions.

EMBEDDING SDGS IN CURRICULUM

With multiple demands on students’ development and workplace preparation, space must be made in business degree programmes for activities that enable students to develop and reflect on their understandings of business sustainability and ethics. Over a decade ago, appeals were made concerning injecting the business curriculum with ethics, stating, “we should not squander this opportunity. Now is the time to act, and to revise both our teaching approach and our curricula” (Gaa & Thorne, 2004, p. 1). As these scholars and others have argued (Dawe, Jucker, & Martin, 2005; GSE Research, 2012; Mather, Denby, Wood, & Harrison, 2011; Petocz & Dixon, 2011; Weaven, Griffin, McPhail, & Smith, 2013; Weybrecht, 2017), transforming a curriculum is crucial for preparing sustainability-literate and ethically-aware business professionals. One way that students might gain an appreciation for ethical business concepts is by learning about CSR through the SDGs framework.

From undergraduate through to postgraduate and executive teaching and learning programmes, the university sector has a very important role to play in SDG implementation (SDSN Australia/Pacific, 2017). In 2017, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) produced a “Getting Started with the SDGs in Universities” guide to support higher education providers to engage with the SDGs. They (SDSN Australia/Pacific, 2017, p. 12) invited universities to:

1. Provide students with the knowledge, skills and motivation to understand and address the challenges of the SDGs.
2. Empower and mobilise young people.
3. Provide an in-depth academic training to implement SDG solutions.
4. Enhance opportunities for capacity building of students and professionals from developing countries to address challenges relating to the SDGs.

There are, however, multiple ways for designing learning that facilitates knowledge, skills and motivation for learning about the SDGs. For example, in 2017, PRME listed the various ways that universities which are PRME signatories approached embedding the SDGs in their curricula. These are highlighted in the PrIMEtime blog and presented in Table 1 (PrIMEtime, 2018).

In addition to these general areas in Table 1, PRME also introduced six key projects that they support to engage university students to tap into their sustainability mindsets by exploring and advancing the SDGs (PRME, 2018). These projects include online resources, such as Gowi, a platform that offers a suite of short courses on sustainability topics; Sulitest, an online tool for measuring sustainability literacy; and Oikos, a sharing and discussion platform for research on sustainability. It also includes projects that involve industry, such as Aim2Flourish, a project that connects students with business leaders to learn about the SDGs, and Breakthrough Innovation Challenge (BIC), a project for Advanced PRME schools which brings together students and young professionals to solve sustainable business challenges.
The final project that connects students authentically with real-world data and experiences is the WikiRate project. WikiRate (2018) is an independent crowdsourced platform, which offers academics, students, professionals or interested parties the opportunity to contribute to making organisational data publicly available, according to their environmental, social and governance performance in the SDGs framework. The goal of WikiRate is to foster greater organisational transparency relating to CSR activities around the world and has been described as a “collective awareness platform for sustainability and social innovation” (Mills et al., 2016, p. 74). Any individual can participate in using the platform, by browsing companies, metrics or topics, voting on important metrics, joining a project or adding sources. It is anticipated that through public collaboration on this platform, it will result in societal benefits such as enhanced knowledge of CSR practices, and the generation of better performance metrics, and overall will enable individuals to be more informed when making decisions such as what companies to purchase from, invest in and work for (WikiRate, 2018). In this way, WikiRate is bringing together diverse minds to design, develop, hone, populate, integrate, and share metrics of corporate performance.

As these PRME projects are rolled out, steps must be taken to evaluate their effectiveness and impact on students’ learning. One recently published report by Decamps (2017) has performed this evaluation in an initial phase with the Sulitest online tool for measuring sustainability literacy. Examining data from 260 universities across 32 countries, from students who had been invited to complete the sustainability literacy test, Decamps (2017) concludes that raising awareness on sustainability issues in higher education is crucial to ensure that future decision-makers are sufficiently equipped to make informed judgements to build a sustainable future. Building on these insights, the following section presents an evaluation of the WikiRate project.

### TABLE 1 Higher education student engagement activities on the UN SDGs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Higher education activities</th>
<th>SDG alignment¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students working with local communities</td>
<td>SDG 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable student awards promoting recognising projects that</td>
<td>SDG 2, SDG 3,</td>
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<tr>
<td>benefit schools and societies</td>
<td>SDG 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainable topic MOOCs</td>
<td>SDG 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women in education scholarships and female leader development</td>
<td>SDG 5</td>
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<td>programmes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collaboration with sustainable industries/internships</td>
<td>SDG 7, SDG 8</td>
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<td>Integrating and offering education assistance to asylum seekers</td>
<td>SDG 10</td>
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<td>and refugees</td>
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<tr>
<td>Classroom activities such as online platforms (‘Take One Step’),</td>
<td>SDG 9, SDG 11,</td>
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<tr>
<td>impact investing and social finance focus, innovative cities</td>
<td>SDG 13, SDG</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>business projects</td>
<td>14, SDG 15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breakthrough innovation challenges surrounding the UN Global</td>
<td>SDG 12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compact</td>
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<td>Sharing progress reports</td>
<td>SDG 16</td>
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<tr>
<td>PRME school collaborations</td>
<td>SDG 17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note 1 This category relates to alignment with the 17 SDGs in the UN’s Global Compact (2018), see [https://www.unglobalcompact.org/sdgs/17-global-goals](https://www.unglobalcompact.org/sdgs/17-global-goals)

Source: Adapted from PRiMEtime Blog activities highlighted in PRME 2017 Annual Report & 2018 Outlook (PRME, 2017)
as implemented at one Australian academic institution. The objective is to examine the value and impact of the WikiRate project as an experiential learning approach for integrating the SDGs into the business curriculum.

THE PROJECT AND CASE STUDY

The research in this paper relates to investigating the utility of a joint venture between the University of Wollongong, Australia, the PRME network and WikiRate. This cross-sector social partnership (Googins & Rochlin, 2000) was forged through identification of a mutually beneficial relationship, in which all parties, by working together, could serve a larger societal purpose of building awareness of CSR and organisational sustainability practices. With the acceleration of globalisation and technology enabling greater communication across international borders, cross-sector social partnerships have been employed in diverse ways to solve complex, social, and ecological issues, particularly in the area of sustainable development (Clarke & Fuller, 2010). Our social-oriented partnership was formed through a shared ideology on the important role of business undergraduates as our future leaders, and the opportunity that this partnership created to develop students’ awareness of issues around global sustainability and of the SDGs.

In this case study, WikiRate was used as a tool for collating data on sustainability practices, which required students to research and report on the SDGs of nominated UN Global Compact companies, and populate the WikiRate database with this

FIGURE 1 Example of the University of Wollongong WikiRate Project page

Retrieved 20th March 2018 from http://wikirate.org/University_of_Wollongong_Faculty_of_Business_Environment_Human_Rights - Content is licensed under the Creative Commons - Attribution 4.0 International License https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/
information. By adding data into the public platform, it was intended that students would gain an understanding of corporate sustainability and CSR through first-hand experiences, as well as play a larger role in assisting the UN Global Compact to track, assess and communicate business’ impact towards the SDGs. Students researched companies and extracted data according to a set of identified metrics from each company’s Communication on Progress (COP) reports, that have been submitted to the UN Global Compact, as well as any other annual or CSR reports. Students then added these data points to the WikiRate platform. The university project was assigned its own project site on the WikiRate platform to monitor progress and activity, see Figure 1 (WikiRate, 2018). To establish greater reliability and validity, students were also required to ‘buddy-check’ the values populated by their peers.

In 2016, several global higher education institutions undertook the WikiRate project and adapted it for their own contexts and purposes. The University of Wollongong in Australia was one of the first universities to pilot this WikiRate project in the Faculty of Business with undergraduate business students. Details of the project now follow, before presenting the methodology and findings from the research.

**The undergraduate capstone subject**

The WikiRate project was piloted in a small, final-year ‘capstone’ undergraduate subject in the Faculty of Business at the University of Wollongong, Australia. This ‘Integrative Research Capstone’ subject is an elective for high-achieving graduates enrolled in a Bachelor of Commerce in any business discipline, such as marketing, accounting, economics, finance, management, public relations, and international business. Sixteen students were enrolled and participated in the WikiRate project at the time of this research. Seven specific learning outcomes were designed for this subject:

1. Demonstrate the capacity to problem solve and effectively work in multidisciplinary contexts.
2. Demonstrate a deep understanding of theoretical principles that underpin the complexities of commercial practice.
3. Demonstrate the ability to effectively research and communicate findings in both written and oral forms appropriate to the intended audience.
4. Relate a wide range of innovative commercial practices to a selected contemporary commercial issue, and in doing so demonstrate an awareness of intercultural values and identities in societies.
5. Demonstrate and apply the principles and ethical underpinnings of corporate governance best practice in a globalised environment.
6. Demonstrate knowledge of the dynamics of working both within a team and a system.
7. Demonstrate an understanding of the use of specified information and communication technologies.

The learning outcomes of the subject relate to skill development in areas such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and research. They also specifically identify intercultural and multidisciplinary competencies and the development of ethical, global CSR practices. As outlined in Appendix A, student learning was assessed through four tasks, all of which align to the subject learning outcomes. Two assessments related to the WikiRate project, which equated to 55% of the total
grades, while two assessments, a sustained writing task and a tutorial discussion, addressed other learning outcomes.

The WikiRate-related assessments included a group report (Appendix B) and a written reflective task (Appendix C). To produce the group report, students worked in multidisciplinary teams (comprising three students) to research their nominated UN Global Compact companies, and to populate the WikiRate database with the SDG metrics that they had been allocated. For example, a team may have been given the telecommunications company Nokia and the SDG environmental metrics such as hazardous waste, hazardous air pollutants, and organic pollutants. Student teams would investigate Nokia’s COP and CSR reports for this information, and then record their findings against these metrics on the WikiRate platform. Each group was encouraged to conceive of this work as a research project. The submitted group report assessment outlined what the students did, what they found, and their analysis of their findings in relation to CSR and the SDGs. Students presented their group reports in the final tutorial of the session, following which a peer-evaluation was conducted on the presentations.

The written reflective task (Appendix C) was a crucial element of this experiential activity, to move the experience into a learning experience (Eyler, 2009) by enabling awareness and development of new skills, attitudes, or ways of thinking through meaning-making processes (Kolb, 1984; Lewis & Williams, 1994; Rubin, 2000). This task required students to reflect on the following three areas relating to the experience:

1. Key areas learnt throughout the session
2. How you will apply these areas in your future working life
3. Your thoughts on whether this subject helped shape these opinions

A Learning Outcome Matrix was developed and made available to students to show explicit alignment of the learning outcomes to the assessments, and to show areas in which students would receive feedback (Appendix A).

**Methodology**

In order to evaluate this experiential learning activity, the WikiRate student engagement project, Phillips, McNaught and Kennedy’s (2010) Learning Environments, Processes and Outcomes (LEPO) Framework was employed. Rather than conducting a single point of analysis, for example how a teacher facilitates learning or the learning outcomes of students, the LEPO framework addresses the complex system of learning functions (processes, environments, outcomes) in a clear, systematic approach in order to examine the impact and benefits of an educational initiative for key stakeholders (students and teachers). The LEPO framework is a conceptual, integrated framework for examining learning and teaching environments, through three interrelating components: the learning environment, learning processes, and learning outcomes. Within the interplay of these components are two general actors: the students and the teacher. As Figure 2 shows, learning environments facilitate learning processes and are determined by learning outcomes. Learning processes lead to learning outcomes, they are facilitated by teachers and are processes by which students engage. Teachers facilitate learning processes, design learning environments, and assess learning outcomes, while students, interacting with their teachers, work within learning environments, engage with learning processes and demonstrate learning outcomes.
Using the LEPO framework to evaluate the activity, the researchers collectively and systematically examined all five components. As described earlier, the learning outcomes appeared relevant, intellectually stimulating, related to real-world concepts, and focused on skills development as well as knowledge. They were also constructively aligned to the assessments, making assessment activities easily related to the objectives of the subject. The learning environment in this case was the physical and online contexts in which the WikiRate experiential learning activity was facilitated. The activity description given to students provided detailed information to support students through the activity. The research team, however, agreed that student perspectives on the degree to which they felt supported during this activity could be further investigated. In relation to learning processes, it is clear that assessments and activities were underpinned theoretically by constructivist and experiential learning theory. Group work, social engagement in real-world activities and organisational information were key elements that enabled learners to build on what they knew in dialog with others (Wertsch, 1985). However, while the teacher’s design, assessment and facilitation activities were clear, again the research team felt that students’ perspectives needed to be uncovered.

To this end, the team sought to collect data through two methods: examination of assessment artefacts and students responses to a survey. The assessments to be examined were the group-work reports and the individual reflections. The survey was designed for distribution after the completion of the subject. Students were asked questions on their experiences with the experiential learning activity, support received, usability of the WikiRate platform, understandings around the SDGs, and the value of the activity. Specific survey questions were included.
**Sustainable development goal knowledge**

- How valuable was this experience of advancing and contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?
- How do the SDGs enable organisations to practice ethical behaviour?
- Were you surprised about the degree of disclosure of the SDGs by your researched companies?
- I want to learn more about the SDGs as a result of this study.

**Experiential perspectives**

- Describe in your own words the experience of working with real-life data.
- What was the value of reviewing the real-life data populated into the WikiRate database by your peers?
- Has this assessment prepared you for any of the following?: Making judgements, Real-world decision making, Valuing my own ideas, Designing assessments, Other.
- What did you find positive about the WikiRate and assessment experience?
- What did you find negative or challenging about the WikiRate assessment?

**Learner processes and support**

- How comfortable were you in using the WikiRate platform?
- What difficulties did you experience in researching international corporations (e.g., language and/or cultural barriers)?

**Pedagogical aspects**

- How did you find the team-work aspect of the assessment?
- Do you think this design should be included in other subjects?
- In the future, what would an ideal design of a research assessment on the subject of 'business contributions to SDGs' look like?
- Please comment on anything else relevant to: a) the assessment b) your learning, or c) your overall experience.

The research was approved by the University of Wollongong human ethics committee (HRMC 2017/246). The survey was distributed to all 16 students enrolled in the subject. Five group reports were submitted and 16 individual assignments were collected for analysis. Out of the 16 students, ten students completed the survey. Survey quantitative data was analysed through basic descriptive statistics. Survey qualitative data was coded using open coding and then organised into key themes using constant comparative method to thematic analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Group reports and individual reflections were coded and analysed using the same analysis process to uncover key themes emerging from the data. The main themes that emerged were used to report the findings of the study. These were: a deep, critical
understanding of the SDGs and CSR; positive perceived value of the activity; new learnings as students transition into their professional working lives; and, challenges and future improvements.

FINDINGS

A deep, critical understanding of the SDGs and CSR

Data was analysed to investigate the degree to which students not only understood the role of the SDGs, but could also critique, argue and communicate their perspectives. On the whole, students went beyond a basic understanding, to offer new thoughts, challenges and evaluations on CSR. One student reported “we found a serious lack of disclosure and found it to be more of a facade of transparency. The information provided failed to adequately address the SDGs” (Survey, student 1). Elsewhere, a similar response, “[f]rom what I gathered, many of them tend to only disclose activities that meet the requirements of the SDGs but not what they had failed to meet” (Survey, student 4). In a group report, students argued:

After researching the ways in which signatories of the UN Global Compact disclose information in sustainability reports, our interpretation of these results serves to illustrate how sustainability disclosure, when not grounded in binding law, can lose sight of the bigger picture of sustainable development and become subsumed with increasing the perceived legitimacy and corporate image of organisations [Report, group 1, pp. 5-6].

In these examples, students are demonstrating deep engagement with the SDGs by evaluating and using their judgements to form arguments.

In their research of real companies, most students observed issues with organisational transparency. In response to a multiple-category selection question on how disclosure of information is treated, eight out of ten students responded as ‘a marketing tool for corporations’, while seven out of ten said as ‘moral or philanthropic’ and as a ‘response to compliance’. These judgements are explored further in the group reports, where one group articulates its discovery:

It seems commonplace for the companies to write about their social development goals in a verbose manner, treating garrulous statements as proxies for hard statistical and quantitative evidence of their efforts towards social goals and sustainability reporting .... While the companies are pledged to the UN Global Compact as signatories, their inadequate adherence to the reporting of predetermined metrics and use of wordplay serves as evidence to their use of social reporting as a marketing and legitimising tool rather than one borne of pure desire for improved social awareness and commitment [Report, group 1, p. 24].

Through evidence-informed arguments, students were seen to speculate on reasons for the lack of disclosure. In the survey, a student reflects “[t]hey probably do this in order to make them look better in papers. They could also be trying to hide company secrets from competitors in order to remain competitive” (Survey, student 4). In the report, a group argues, “[t]his missing information in sustainability reports leads to the assumption that firms are using the GRI [Global Reporting Initiative] and SDGs label as a legitimizing tool rather than a means of actually committing to sustainable
development” (Report, group 4, p. 1). One group learnt that organisations disclose goals that “focused on national policy, but fail to make progress towards sustainability targets that are not included in nationwide frameworks” (Report, group 2, p. 1), while another group found that the quality of reporting was “independent to the size and capabilities of the companies being analysed” (Report, group 3, p. 1). In these examples, students are using analysis and reasoning to make sense of the information made publicly available.

Thinking about the future, individuals and groups expressed ideas on how to improve the disclosure of and organisational alignment to the SDGs. One student exclaimed reporting against the SGDs “should be mandatory” (Survey, student 10), echoed in a group report saying that “there must be legal regulation that binds companies to their sustainability commitments” (Report, group 1, p. 27). Other future implications included a focus on improving communication “to reduce the gap between rhetoric and reality” (Report, group 5, p. 16), governmental awareness to adopt a more “holistic approach to sustainability [so that organisations] contribute to the achievement of all sustainable development goals” (Report, group 2, p. 18), as well as improvement of reporting methods through, for example, standardised indexes and metrics (Report, group 5). It can be seen here that students have more than a deep understanding of the SDGs and CSR, and demonstrate a command of the topic. Through experiential learning and reflective processes students have acquired new knowledge, which they used to propose future actions (Mezirow & Associates, 1990).

Positive perceived value of the activity

Data across the group reports, individual reflections and surveys confirm the value of the experiential learning activity. Students reported a “deeper understanding” and new “opinions and knowledge” (Reflection, student 7) of the UN Global Compact and the SDGs and the role that they play in society. Reflecting on researching organisations and reporting findings through a publicly available database, WikiRate, one student describes: “myself and my fellow classmates were able to contribute to the ideology that PRME represents and the values it seeks to portray in achieving future sustainable development” (Reflection, student 16).

Experiential learning can lead to powerful social learning (Eyler, 2009), which was reflected in the data as students discuss making a positive contribution towards a more sustainable society. For example, one student highlighted “[l]t felt good to aid in the collection of data which may be used to keep companies honest in the future” (Survey, student 2) and another exclaimed “[t]his is good preparation for us as students because we recognise the importance of our contribution to the sustainable development goals whatever sectors that we will work in” (Reflection, student 5).

Thinking about their practice in the future, a student stated “I will take away the lessons learned on the importance of CSR and use them as motivation to push for responsible and ethical business practice” (Reflection, student 11). The real world aspect of this activity enabled students to contextualise their arguments and “learn about ethics in a different way and apply these to real word examples” (Reflection, student 9). It also aided in the learning about other cultures and countries that was “extremely different to what I was used to, which led to my ‘eyes opening’ and the desire to find out more” (Reflection, student 9), signalling motivation to gain further knowledge, a key pedagogical feature of experiential learning activities (Biggs & Tang, 2007).
The pedagogical design of the subject that featured in this experiential learning activity was also investigated for its perceived value. Most students articulated how different or “eye opening” (Survey, student 4) this subject had been. Thinking about their discipline-based studies, a student describes the subject as initially “daunting ... It seemed a world away from the marketing or public relations subjects I usually take” (Reflection, student 10). One student described it as an “unusual yet refreshing experience that has been vastly different to other subjects I have completed in the past” (Reflection, student 11), and another welcomed the change from the “hamster wheel exams we are exposed to” to allow for “a new style of thought and not that of regurgitation of the lecturer” (Survey, student 10).

Through hands-on experience, the data demonstrated students’ heightened awareness of their presuppositions. Students highlighted how the activity forced them to think critically and not take organisational public statements “on face value” (Reflection, student 15). Through the activity “rather than portray the WikiRate initiative as a purely positive and powerful, the subject invited us to challenge the UN, and critique it - to see if it was actually meeting its goals, or creating meaningful change” (Reflection, student 2). This critical awareness led to one student having a deep learning experience where he/she reflected not only on how things were, but “what ethical principles are at stake”, in real-world activity (Moore, 2010, p. 11). The student described:

In one particular tutorial, the class had a group discussion about child labour and we were encouraged to share our individual viewpoints. Coming from a Western background, I had always felt that the use of child labour by corporations is unethical. However, I had not previously considered the negative ramifications of stopping the employment of under-aged workers on the children themselves, their family and their local community. One of my colleagues in [this subject] was brought up in Nepal, where the use of child labour is relatively common. He made the point that, many people from Nepal have no choice but to send their children to work from a young age to ensure the family has sufficient income to purchase basic necessities. He argued that, if the employment of children is stopped, without ensuring that their families are provided with an alternative source of income, the overall impact on children’s lives would most likely be negative, rather than positive. Whilst I did find it upsetting that in some countries child labour is considered to be a necessary part of life, this experience shows I need to take a more holistic perspective when considering the ways in which social issues can be resolved. (Reflection, student 14)

A well-designed pedagogical model enabled students to work collaboratively and in dialogue with one another (Biggs & Tang, 2007), and as this reflection showed, it can produce powerful learning experiences. On the other hand, an international student also reflected on their enjoyment in this multi-disciplinary subject, saying “[b]eing an international student, I had learned a different approach to working in groups and interacting with others from my culture. These class discussions were the first substantial instances where I interacted with my undergraduate peers for extended periods of time” (Reflection, student 13).

The data further indicated that this activity demonstrated opportunities for metacognition. Students articulated considerable cognitive changes by making judgments on their new learnings and they examined how they wanted to engage in the world (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). Reflecting on prior knowledge, a student stated “[p]rior to this class, my knowledge of these areas of business was very simplistic and one-dimensional” (Reflection, student 8). Another student described how the
activity had “helped me think more thoroughly in everything I see and not to just reach a conclusion too soon... I believe this is crucial, as to build a better world we need people that care more and not just about themselves and their daily lives” (Reflection, student 6). Reflecting on their world view, connections to spirituality were made for one student: “This subject intertwined with my Christian faith, both centre on my ethical standpoint, and question what happens in the surrounding world” and that the student now “would prefer to work in a not-for-profit organisation, that engages with sustainable business practice” (Reflection, student 9).

New learnings as students transition into their professional working lives

Encouraging students to contemplate their futures, and the kind of professional they wish to become, was an initial goal of embedding this activity into the undergraduate business curriculum. Almost all students remarked how they would take this new knowledge into the future, for example, on the kind of organisation they would wish to be employed in: “Learning about the UN Global Compact has also given me a goal of working with an organisation that adheres to standards like Human Rights and Environmental. If not, I would strive to help the organisation achieve them for a better society” (Reflection, student 6).

The data showed that several students had learnt about globalisation and the impact of working with different countries. For example, a student proposed “in the future, I will likely work in organisations which are impacted by international factors” and that this new “knowledge and new level of understanding I have gained from this subject means I can enter future workplaces more prepared and with a broader, multifaceted perspective” (Reflection, student 8). Another student reflected that “understanding and accepting that difference in my working life is important for international business” (Reflection, student 9).

Students also reflected on how this new knowledge would affect their work practices and approaches. A finance student commented “I now understand the ways corporations can manipulate and shape public perception through their ‘sustainability practices’. This knowledge will be greatly useful in my future working life as it introduces issues with transparency, ethics and reporting, and how these must be considered” (Reflection, student 8). Another student commented “I will be continuously critical about the sustainability practices in companies I work for. This is a result of my experiences with WikiRates and the significant lack of authentic disclosure by companies” (Reflection, student 10).

Reflections such as these suggest that this experiential learning activity had better prepared students, as they are able to question personal epistemologies and assumptions. One student outlined “business plays a big part in shaping the world we live in, which means they have the potential to pave the way for meaningful changes. With this in mind, I hope that in working life I can look at the bigger picture and adjust the way I act based on a desire to achieve both business objectives and a sustainable future” (Reflection, student 11). Another reflected on the power of individuals as change agents, “In the end, businesses are all run and staffed by individuals ... I, myself, one of the members of this community, am challenged to doing good - not doing evil - to keep our world alive” (Reflection, student 12). Finally, a student contemplated how they would take this new knowledge when becoming a business leader:

When attempting to resolve an issue within the workplace, I will consider how my colleagues personal experiences may influence the way they perceive the issue at
hand” [and then later in the same reflection], “overall, my experiences in [this subject] have encouraged me to constantly question the activities and initiatives undertaken by corporations and to consider how they will impact the global community. Consequently, I feel I will be a more effective leader upon entering the corporate environment” [Reflection, student 15].

It has been argued that these abilities - to question, to be open-minded, to critique personal understandings - are key indicators that these students are now more likely to experience a smoother transition into professional practice (Billet, 2009). These reflections are also powerful markers of more socially-aware business graduates and future advocates of business practices that uphold the UN Global Compact.

**Challenges and future improvements**

The challenges experienced in this experiential learning activity predominately related to the difficulty in finding data. When asked about the challenges encountered, students responded, “DISCLOSURE!” (Survey, student 1), “finding extra information, e.g., newspaper articles … to verify details” (Survey, student 2), “mostly cultural barriers … the country that I researched had a strong censorship” (Survey, student 4) and that they couldn’t “see the full context behind it” (Survey, student 2). In a survey response, one student relented “Frankly, it was hectic. Specifically the data I was looking for was so difficult to find or access and I spent hours looking for the information online” (Survey, student 4). These challenges relate to the learning experiences expressed earlier through the data on CSR reporting and disclosure. However, in the future, more care will be taken to communicate this to students to prevent over-burdening students and to limit their time searching for relevant information.

Two other future recommendations emerged from the data. The first related to supporting group work. While most students enjoyed groups, there were some who found they had “differing goals and expectations” (Survey, student 10), and therefore more attention will be afforded to establishing, supporting and monitoring multi-disciplinary groups. The second recommendation came from a student who asked for “more interactions with the SDGs or even the United Nations - maybe someone from the United Nations could come and meet with the class. I am also thinking a field trip but that’s probably too far-fetched” (Survey, student 4). A guest speaker over Skype or face-to-face will be explored for future iterations.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This paper presented and evaluated an initiative designed to educate business students on sustainable business practices and corporate social responsibility (CSR), through embedding the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the business curriculum. An experiential learning activity was outlined, through a tripartite partnership between the University of Wollongong, PRME, and WikiRate. Through WikiRate, an online public platform and repository of business data, students in groups collected and analysed real-life data from UN Global Compact corporate signatories and reported on research questions around the transparency and accountability of the SDGs.

Our aim in this project was to evaluate student perceptions and impact through the WikiRate student engagement project, as well as the pedagogical effectiveness, the design and implementation, of a learning activity, for deep and personally relevant learning. In doing so, we analysed students’ group reports and individual
reflections, as well as students’ responses to a survey. The findings of this study suggested that the value of this activity was more than learning about the 17 SDGs. Through experiential learning, students formulated arguments and perspectives on corporate transparency, language and marketing, government policy, the principles of the United Nations (UN), and broader socio-political impacts. The findings show evidence of relevant personal learning through the way in which students were able to draw their own conclusions about how things are and the way they could/should be. These judgements are powerful credence that can potentially transform students into sustainable practitioners. This pilot study offers strong indicators of more socially-aware business graduates and future advocates of business practices that uphold the UN Global Compact.

In order to provide students with the best possible future, it is of growing importance that academics produce more hands-on, experiential learning activities that enable students to make sense of real-world complexities and problems. By engaging in experiential learning activities, students learn to reflect on their own presuppositions and understandings, practices which can potentially follow them into employment and make a real different to the business climate of the future. It’s not enough to hope that the next generation of business leaders will do it better. It’s also not enough that while we have professionals-in-training under our care, we don’t take the opportunity to frame education beyond disciplinary knowledge and skills. We need to re-focus on the bigger picture - our global footprint. This won’t happen though if we simply tell students about it, or we leave them to their own devices to read it in a book or on the Internet. Deliberate design and pedagogy are essential to engage learners in deep and relevant learning experiences in order to have lasting, effective change in the world. The findings presented here indicate that we are on the right path for developing globally-minded citizens and agents of change.

Finally, as this is a pilot study, this study is limited by the small sample size at a single institution. Aspects of this research may be replicated, including the use of WikiRate in a curriculum and the LEPO evaluation framework to determine the effectiveness of an educational initiative. However, it should be noted that an advantage of employing the WikiRate student engagement project is that it is adaptable to the contextual affordances of the discipline and curriculum, as well as the motivations and intentions of the coordinator. It is an imperative that when introducing innovation into a curriculum that coordinators undergo a process of evaluation to assess its effectiveness and to make improvements, as is the case in this paper.

Further research needs to follow to evaluate the design, utility and impact of this project over time. To do so, longitudinal data needs to be collected on student perceptions and learning outcomes. It would also be useful to explore the way in which other institutions have employed WikiRate or activities around the SDGs in their business curricula, to explore synergies, uncover best practices, and learn through sharing teaching and learning experiences. In addition, further research is needed into WikiRate and other engagement platforms to investigate their impact and effectiveness for meeting the SGDs, inspiring organisational change, or stimulating new avenues for sustainable development.

REFERENCES


## APPENDIX A LEARNING OUTCOME MATRIX

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning outcomes</th>
<th>Sustained writing</th>
<th>Tutorial discussion</th>
<th>Research project</th>
<th>Reflection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate the capacity to problem solve and effectively work in multidisciplinary contexts.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrate a deep understanding of theoretical principles that underpin the complexities of commercial practice.</td>
<td>✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrate the ability to effectively research and communicate findings in both written and oral forms appropriate to the intended audience.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relate a wide range of innovative commercial practices to a selected contemporary commercial issue, and in doing so demonstrate an awareness of intercultural values and identities in societies.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate and apply the principles and ethical underpinnings of corporate governance best practice in a globalised environment.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate knowledge of the dynamics of working both within a team and a system.</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrate an understanding of the use of specified information and communication technologies.</td>
<td>✓</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>
### APPENDIX B GROUP REPORT ASSESSMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marking criteria</th>
<th>Report (30 marks)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demonstrated ability to review the literature and explore what research has been done before on this topic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identification of appropriate data to answer the prescribed research question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identification of a research method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demonstrated ability to analyse data and draw conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grammar and spelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appropriate acknowledgement and citations according to UOW referencing policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Presentation (10 marks)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evidence of cross-disciplinary engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to present information orally and visually</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to present information for the general public/interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability to respond to questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Peer-evaluation (5 marks)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evidence of a more advanced and deeper understanding of the subject matter, skills and processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ability as an active leaner and assessor (this also encourages a deeper approach to learning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evidence of critical reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development of students’ own subjectivity and judgement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>Research project: 3000 - 4000 words (due in week 13 during tutorial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presentation: 15 minute presentation (due in Week 13 during tutorial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer evaluation: respond to a given marking guide (due in Week 13 during tutorial)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weighting</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style and format</td>
<td><strong>Research report format including (suggested outline):</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Table of contents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research question/aim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literature review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The research report will be:</td>
<td>Word-processed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Double-spaced, size 12 Times New Roman font</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Printed single-sided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tables and Figures labelled appropriately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Presentation</strong></td>
<td>Oral presentation and students can use visual aids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peer-evaluation</strong></td>
<td>Students respond to a given marking outline</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C INDIVIDUAL WRITTEN REFLECTIVE ASSESSMENT

**Description**
You are required to write 600 words summarising the project, including the following:
1. Key areas learnt throughout the session
2. How you will apply these areas in your future working life, and
3. Your thoughts on whether this subject helped shape these opinions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length</th>
<th>600 words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weighting</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style and format</td>
<td>The individual reflection can be written in the first person</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

ABOUT THE AUTHORS AND CORRESPONDENCE

_Bonnie Amelia Dean_ is an Academic Developer at the University of Wollongong and has expertise in Higher Education teaching, learning and research. In this role, Bonnie partners with academics to enhance teaching and learning capacities and scholarship of teaching and learning practices. Bonnie has published in the areas of teaching in higher education, work-integrated learning, reflective assessment, casual teaching, doctoral studies and academic development. Her research interests lay in the areas of experiential and work-integrated learning as well as the scholarship of teaching learning. Bonnie is editor of the *International Journal of Doctoral Studies* and reviewer of several international Higher Education research journals. Bonnie is the previous recipient of the _Australian College of Educators_ award and is Senior Fellow with the _Higher Education Academy_.

_Corresponding author:_ Dr Bonnie Amelia Dean, Learning, Teaching & Curriculum, University of Wollongong, Northfields Avenue, Wollongong, NSW 2500, Australia.

_E bonnie_dean@uow.edu.au_

_Belinda Gibbons_ is a Senior Lecturer within the Sydney Business School. She is the Australia/New Zealand Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) Coordinator and a member of the United Nations PRME Advisory Committee. Belinda designed, developed and coordinates the interdisciplinary undergraduate capstone unit at UOW onshore and offshore campuses alongside the MBA design thinking postgraduate subject. She was a recipient of the 2016 Citations for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning for her work titled ‘For pioneering the design, development, and implementation of an interdisciplinary experiential learning environment as a means of embedding responsible decision-making in business higher education’. Her experiential learning computer simulation received the NSW Innovation iAwards in 2014. Belinda has a unique blend of teaching and learning, governance and research expertise in the field of responsible management education and experiential learning with contribution evidenced at institutional, national and international levels.

Dr Belinda Gibbons, School of Management, Marketing & Operations, Faculty of Business, University of Wollongong, Northfields Avenue, Wollongong, NSW 2500, Australia.

_E bgibbons@uow.edu.au_
**Stephanie Perkiss** is a lecturer at the University of Wollongong, Australia. While completing an accounting degree, Stephanie worked as a professional, public practice accountant. Stephanie received a PhD in Accounting from the University of Wollongong (2015) and is a Certified Practicing Accountant (CPA). The main interests of Dr Perkiss are corporate responsibility and disclosure, counter-/alternative accounts, scholarship of teaching and learning, sociological theory and social and environmental accounting and accountability, with focus on sustainable development goals, climate change, disaster and displacement. She has published in *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal, Critical Perspectives on Accounting, Social and Environmental Accountability Journal* and the *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, and is on the editorial board of *Accounting Forum*. She is the International Associate for the Centre for Social and Environmental Accounting Research, as well as being a member of many other research and teaching associations.

Dr Stephanie Perkiss, School of Finance, Economics & Accounting, Faculty of Business, University of Wollongong, Northfields Avenue, Wollongong, NSW 2500, Australia.

E sperkiss@uow.edu.au