

**Bridging from University to Community: An Evaluation of the Effect of Student Outreach
Work in Communities in Australia, New Zealand, China, the United States
and Four Other Countries**

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Abstract

In an ongoing effort, we have collected data from 214 university students who participated in a new method of community-based business education in China, New Zealand, USA, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, Zimbabwe and the UK. This SIFE (Students in Free Enterprise) program operates in 48 countries and at 1800 universities. SIFE students are empowered through an elaborate system of program design and personal involvement of business leaders, to teach members of the community about free market principles, enterprise and good governance. We have also surveyed 31 faculty advisors in those countries. Faculty advisors, usually university staff members, 'manage' the student teams in the universities and connect the student effort with university administration.

Students report they are willing to give up considerable leisure time to participate in SIFE, and in many cases work on multiple projects. They indicate significant educational outcomes for the community participants, and a boost for their personal careers (presumably from the connection to business leaders and the reference to SIFE in their CVs).

Faculty members confirm substantial learning outcomes for the students, with new skills generated. They rank 'entrepreneurship' generally as being of high importance to their countries and their universities and compare the SIFE experience favourably with other student activities, such as business plan competitions.

This approach supports the Practical Entrepreneurship Teaching Engagement (PETE) model by creating a sense of *belonging*, *challenging* the students to practical work outside the classrooms, including a real life *competition* model, *connecting* students to the corporate environment early, creating a *signal* effect within schools, markets and stakeholders, and by producing a *sustainable* community benefit.

Keywords

Entrepreneurship, teaching, SIFE, action-learning, practical entrepreneurship teaching engagement

Introduction

The global shift from a managed economy to an entrepreneurial economy has intensified the need and market for entrepreneurial education that involves all strata of community. While many community participants could previously rely on governmental help, those resources begin to become scarce. Entrepreneurship education has been identified as a critical factor in preventing future high levels of long term unemployment, and there is evidence of a strong correlation between educational level achieved and high income over a lifetime (De Faoite et al. 2003). To create greater community involvement, academia must move closer to the reality of the work place. Greater collaboration between the academic and business communities has been advocated for many years (Cochrane 1988; Forcht 1991; Gabor 1991; Orr 1993; Reed 1993; Warwick 1989; White 1993). A need exists for more interaction between educational environments and external organisations so that current business thinking can be introduced into schools (White 1993). We speculate that the SIFE (Students in Free Enterprise) effort can effectively connect business leaders and managers, after earlier reports with a much smaller sample size indicate the favourable reaction of business leaders to the SIFE project outcomes (Mueller et al. 2005). It is an action-learning program where a student learns by reflecting on the actions being taken in solving a real organisational problem with participants of similar position also experiencing challenging situations (McLaughlin and Thorpe 1993; Eden and Huxman 1996).

Many entrepreneurial characteristics, such as self-confidence, persistence and high energy levels, cannot easily be acquired in the classroom (Miller 1987), and this program engages students and their communities, to perform in a real environment, overcoming market resistance, structuring effective programs, measuring their outcome and demonstrating the results to executives. In a nutshell, these projects resemble real-life managerial challenges, those that these students would be expected to perform once they graduate and are hired into entry-level managerial positions.

Methodology

All authors have operated SIFE teams in various countries before and have access to student and faculty to whom invitations were sent to participate in a global review of the program <<http://www.sifeaction.com/survey>>. Two hundred and forty one student replies were received from eight countries; China, New Zealand, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, USA, Zimbabwe and the UK. Thirty one faculty member replies were received from nine countries (all above, plus India). The SIFE program is active in many more countries, and this effort is continuing to include the remaining SIFE countries. For all countries with the exception of China, the US and Singapore, the

sample represents 15 per cent or more of the active SIFE students in that year. In the US, the sample is representative for one of the largest US SIFE team, from Drury University, where about 25 per cent of students replied. In China and Singapore, the sample includes 30 per cent or more of the active SIFE students. With a good mix of 'old' SIFE countries, where the program has been active for many years (i.e. US and Malaysia) and 'new' SIFE countries with less than three years of history (China and the UK), the authors believe that this data set is representative of the different SIFE efforts worldwide, including varying levels of program maturity. Affected members of the community were not reviewed, as in many cases this population is not accessible and we believe the academic faculty advisors can adequately represent the outcomes for target groups of SIFE students, i.e. immigrants, children, prisoners, etc.

Results

As part of the SIFE annual reporting during the respective countries' national competitions, students must clearly and convincingly demonstrate the outcomes they have achieved in their various projects. These reports are presented to the 'judges', all senior business executives, many from large global companies, such as Unilever, Henkel, KPMG, Wal-Mart, PepsiCo, Korn/Ferry International, Coca-Cola, etc., and complemented by leaders of local and regional firms.

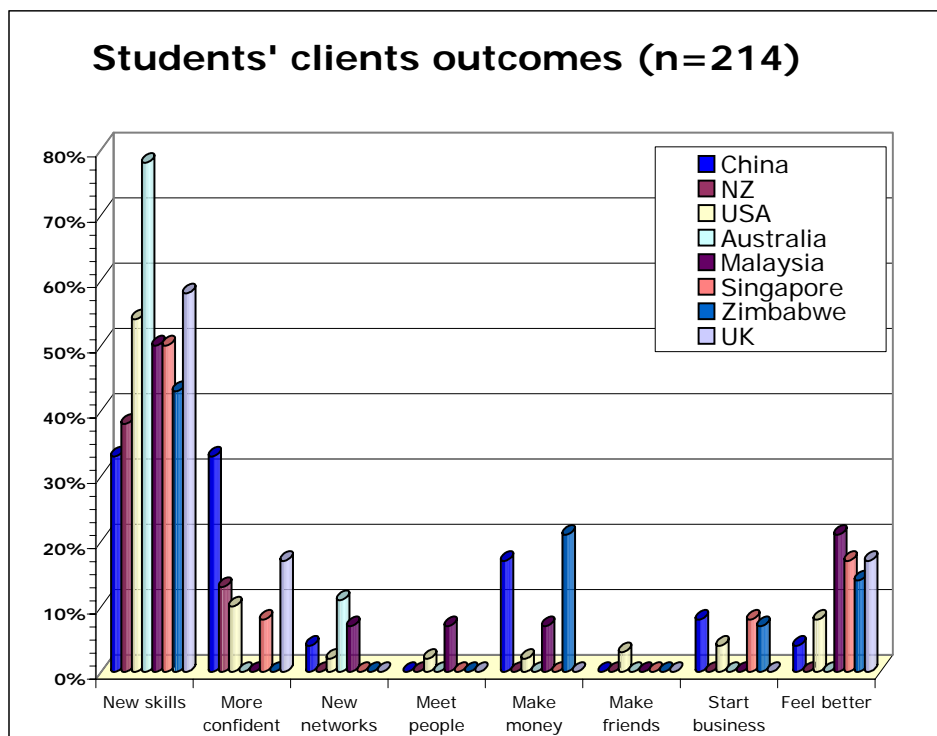


Figure 1. Students' clients outcome

Students report significant outcomes for their 'clients', usually community members with little or no access to business education or mentors/advisors. In few cases do these clients earn new money (China, Malaysia and Zimbabwe), while in most countries the intangible gains of new skills is prominent. Confidence in making business decisions is improved in several of the countries, and a general 'feel good' effect is evident.

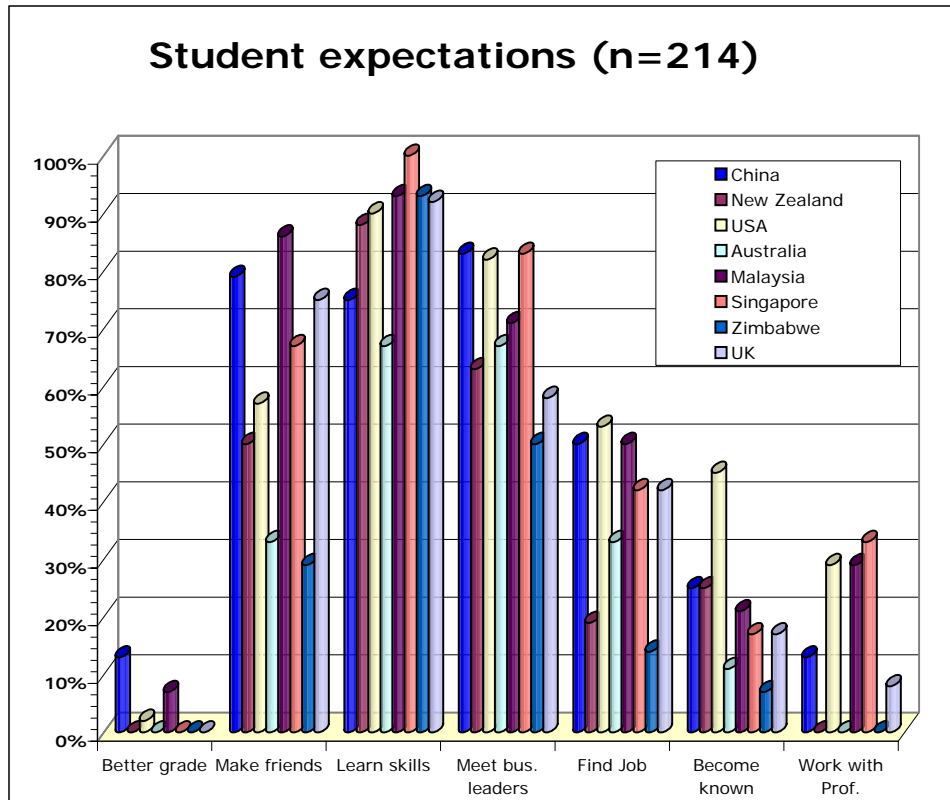


Figure 2. Student expectations

For themselves, the students expected to learn new skills, meet business leaders and make new friends, and to a lesser extent to find a job, become more known within the university and work closer with the teaching staff. We acknowledge with interest that a 'better grade' is insignificant for the students, indicating that students can see the value of this process extending beyond their immediate schooling interest.

How well were those expectations met?

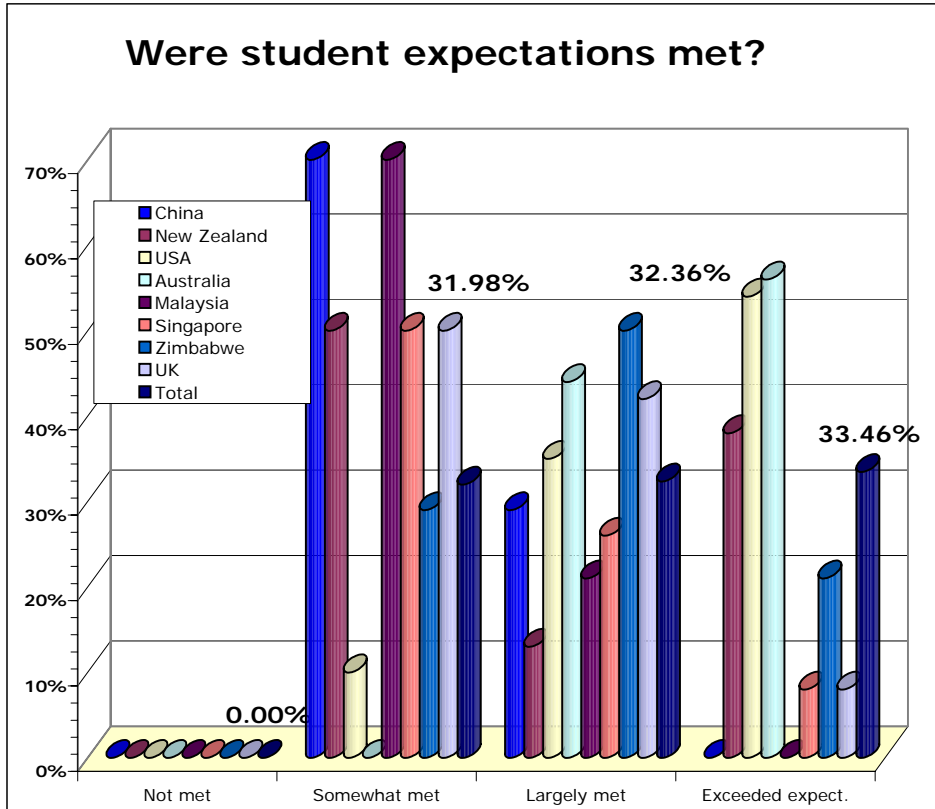


Figure 3. Were student expectations met?

More than 65 per cent of all students reported their expectations were met 'largely' or were 'exceeded' (with the figures for all students/totals shown in Table 3). In countries where the SIFE program is relatively new (less than three years), significantly more students report 'somewhat' met expectations, while in countries with established programs of more than four years (the US and Australia), the expectations were met to a much great extent. This overall success in terms of student motivation explains the strong dedication to the program. Seventy one per cent of the students report they spend more than six hours per week on SIFE work, accumulating hundreds of hours of practical work experience per year.

The student reports of increased learning are confirmed by the evaluations of the faculty advisors.

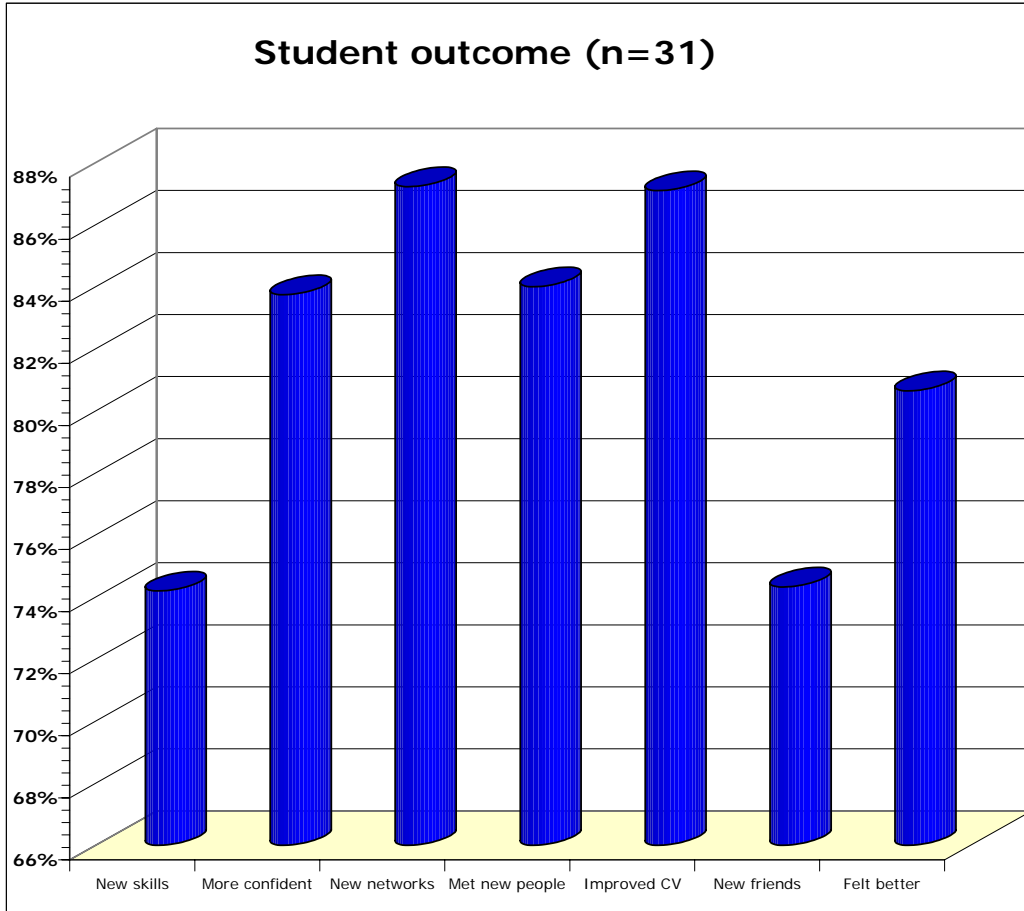


Figure 4. Student outcome

Faculty advisors reported significant learnings in several areas, mostly in areas of confidence, creation of new networks, meeting new people, improving student CVs and new technical skills. Given the chronic time constraints of teaching staff, we were interest to compare the effectiveness of the SIFE program to that of other activities, such as business plan competitions. The faculty responses were astonishingly clear in ranking SIFE highly.

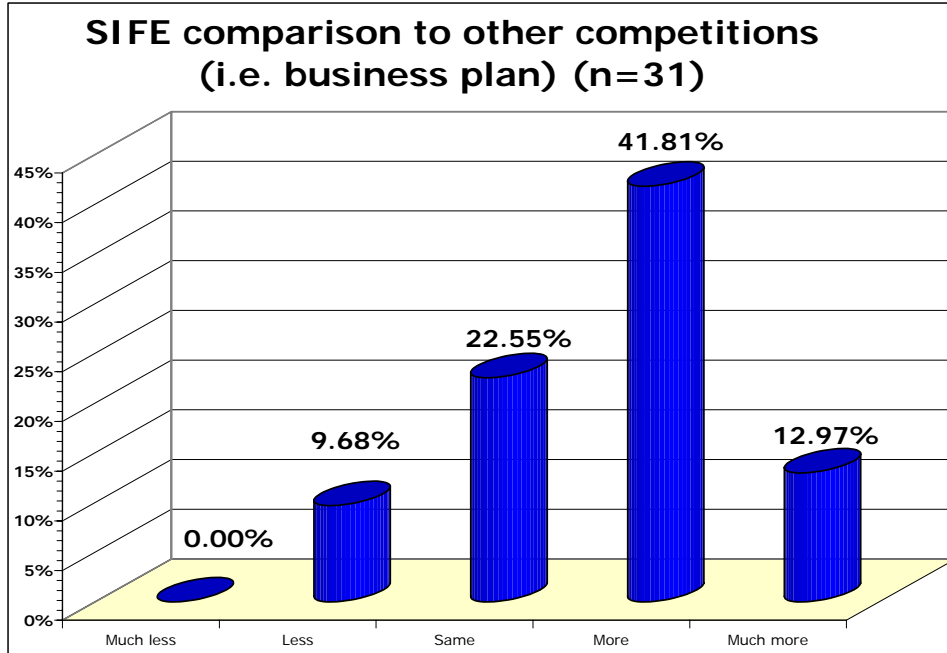


Figure 5. SIFE comparison to other competitions

When compared to business plan competitions, more than 54 per cent of the faculty felt that SIFE was a 'more' or 'much more' effective program likely because of the practical hands-on features of the SIFE program. The authors, having participated in many of business plan competitions, interpret this as a mandate to consider student activities where managerial training can be applied through hands-on work rather than in an abstract speculative fashion.

Summary

This student effort includes several elements which the authors believe can be explained with the PETE (Practical Entrepreneurship Teaching Engagement) model. The PETE model describes ingredients of an interactive action learning program and seeks to explain that the presence of these factors, by using the SIFE work as an example, can improve the effectiveness of action learning. We speculate that, in order to generate such an extraordinary personal commitment from students, faculty advisors and business leaders, specific elements should be present:



Figure 6. Practical Entrepreneurship Teaching Engagement model

We propose that action learning programs in entrepreneurship teaching will benefit if they include elements of:

- *Belonging*, where the students become members of a distinct group of individuals, similar to being hired into a new company where there are incumbents, thus triggering the need to create effective governance models to proceed from idea to reality. The SIFE teams create such a belonging through their defined membership.
- *Challenge*, where goals are set high and the rewards are commensurate. In this case, exposure to business leaders and travel of the countries' winning teams to a World Cup event provides an effective challenge to perform
- *Competition*, where students, similar to corporate employees, compete for customer goodwill, funding and attention
- *Connection*, where students are directly exposed to real-life corporate environments, to understand the performance demands that exist in the work place
- *Signalling*, where achievements become well publicised success stories in the students' communities of peers, families and schools, as well as setting high standards for followers
- *Sustainability*, where students are reminded that success needs to be sustainable to generate true stakeholder value in the long term.

The outcomes of these SIFE projects can easily be confirmed with executives who serve on business advisory boards, judge the SIFE competitions or assist with financial sponsorship of projects, there is uniform praise for the deliverables. We have collected more than 50 anecdotal reports from executives worldwide, mirroring the examples shown here: "SIFE is extraordinarily effective in making our future managers understand community needs, and we believe that will be an important skill set for emerging global leaders" says Allan Williams, Regional General Manager New Zealand and Pacific Islands, Qantas Airways, Auckland (SIFE NZ, 2004). Paul Jenner, International Account Director PepsiCo Asia, Hong Kong, adds: "I think it is brilliant for you students to spend a lot of your time to work on practical projects in your communities. You will become better managers, the people around you will benefit, and our company is delighted to see you focus on sustainable business practices." (SIFE China 2004). "There is nothing better than to take the students out of the class room and into the real world. At Henkel, we prefer action-oriented managers who seek opportunities in their communities to demonstrate the innovative spirit our company is known for worldwide. Our communities are our base for business, and to create lasting values is a wonderful achievement that the students can be proud of," says John Arrol General Manager, Henkel Singapore" (SIFE Singapore 2004).

The SIFE program fulfils these criteria, and appears to be a worthwhile investment for students, faculty, school staff and business leaders.

The survey instrument used for this research is available at <<http://www.sifeaction.com/survey>>.

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