

# Kicking goals in education: How an innovative AFL partnership prepares students for success on and off the field

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## Abstract

*As Generation Z enters the workforce and Generation Alpha progresses through their schooling years into tertiary education, innovative industry-academia partnerships are key to enhancing student retention, success, and career readiness. The Essendon Education Academy (EEA), a collaboration between Essendon Football Club and RMIT University, demonstrates how embedding education within industry can drive student engagement and achievement. By integrating structured industry placements, hands-on learning, and direct exposure to elite sports environments, the EEA fosters career-ready graduates with industry-specific skills, strong professional networks, and clear pathways to employment. The model's support structures ensure students remain engaged, confident, and prepared for multi-phase careers. This paper explores the scalability of the EEA model beyond AFL, highlighting its potential to improve student retention and success across other sports and industries. By bridging education with real-world experience, the EEA presents a replicable, cost-effective model for enhancing student achievement and workforce integration.*

## Introduction

Industry-academia partnerships are more critical than ever in Australia's evolving tertiary education landscape. Universities, Technical and Further Education (TAFEs), and Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) are rapidly adapting to skills shortages, sector reforms - such as the Universities Accord, which calls for stronger alignment between qualifications and industry - and shifting learner expectations.

As the value of qualifications evolves and Generations Z and Alpha enter higher education and the workforce, these collaborations ensure students gain the skills, knowledge, experience, and networks needed to thrive. Embedding work-integrated learning (WIL) and authentic, real-world experiences into tertiary programs is increasingly recognised as an effective strategy to improve graduate employability and prepare students for career transitions (Jackson, 2016). These high-impact practices allow learners to construct professional identity and apply theoretical knowledge in context, which are key to lifelong career success (Smith et al., 2014).

A prime example is the Essendon Education Academy (EEA), a pioneering partnership between RMIT University and the Essendon Football Club (EFC). The EEA's innovative Dual Diploma program seamlessly blends academic learning with real-world industry experience, setting a new standard for education-industry integration.

While students today have access to vast learning experiences, strong business and pedagogical principles remain essential. Core skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication continue to underpin career success, particularly as Generation

Alpha enters higher education. Moreover, the ability to interpret complex challenges and apply knowledge in practical settings remains as vital as ever.

Leadership is a key pillar of the EEA model. Students gain formal qualifications while also developing leadership capabilities through WIL in a high-performance sports environment. This equips them with adaptability, resilience, and decision-making skills; skills regarded as essential for navigating multi-phase careers. The *Future of Jobs Report* (World Economic Forum, 2025) highlights leadership and social influence as critical skills for the evolving workforce. By embedding these into the curriculum, the EEA model ensures graduates are prepared for dynamic career pathways.

This paper examines how the EEA model prepares students for multi-phase careers across multiple industries by embedding them in high-performance environments, offering hands-on learning opportunities, integrating experiential learning into the curriculum, and fostering strong industry connections. By combining hands-on experience with academic rigour, the program provides a replicable blueprint for institutions aiming to enhance industry-aligned education and ensure long-term career success for students.

### **The Essendon Education Academy model**

Uniquely positioned at the intersection of sport, education and professional development, the EEA offers students the opportunity to earn a Diploma of Business (BSB50120) and a Diploma of Leadership and Management (BSB50420) across a 12-month period. Through structured industry engagement, hands-on learning, and direct exposure to elite sports environments and their people, the program fosters career readiness, leadership development, and practical industry skills. As Billett (2009) notes, "Graduates are expected to have the capacities to engage immediately and effectively in the professional setting where they secure employment" - a standard increasingly demanded by employers, students, and governments alike.

The EEA aligns with national and global best practice in WIL, which emphasises meaningful student engagement in real-world contexts as a vehicle for developing employability and confidence (Smith et al., 2014; Ferns, Russell & Kay, 2016). By situating learning in the day-to-day operations of a professional AFL club, students gain insights and capabilities that extend far beyond the classroom. Taught by RMIT Global Business and Leadership teachers, EEA students benefit from studying in a high-performance environment at the EFC, undertaking a minimum of 100 hours of real-world work experience across the Club and its partner network, and accessing articulation pathways into undergraduate programs at RMIT University. Additionally, two graduate roles are offered annually at the EFC, reinforcing the direct employment pathways embedded within the program and the Club's commitment to developing the next generation of their workforce.

Since its inception, 97% of graduates from the EEA have been representatives of Gen Z (born 1995-2009). With the first wave of Gen Alpha (born 2010-2024) now nearing their completion of their secondary schooling education, academics and futurists are exploring how this generation will approach higher education and careers. Research suggests that while Gen Z predicted to work in 17 jobs across five careers (McCrindle & Wolfinger, 2009), Gen Alpha will enter a workforce where shifting industries and career transitions are the norm. Given this evolving landscape, we hypothesise that education models integrating industry experience, such as the EFC-RMIT collaborative partnership, will better equip Gen Z and Alpha students with the adaptability and skills needed for lifelong success.

## **Preparing Generation Alpha for multi-phase careers**

Gen Alpha will enter a workforce where career paths span multiple industries and evolve continuously. The EEA Program equips students with foundational knowledge, key skills, and practical experience across four key domains:

1. **Sport:** Immersing students in elite sports environments to develop teamwork, resilience, and high-performance mindsets.
2. **Business:** Providing exposure to a broad range of specialisations, ensuring students understand the diverse career opportunities within business.
3. **Leadership:** Cultivating essential leadership qualities to navigate professional environments and drive success in various industries.
4. **Management:** Building skills in project coordination, strategic thinking, and operational leadership.

By integrating these four areas into a 12-month program, students gain a holistic education that prepares them for careers in sport, business, and beyond. Gen Alpha students are well positioned to navigate a multi-sector future career, as they are also a generation that will spend more time learning and synthesising information than any previous generation. Gen Alpha students have an appetite to quickly upskill, adapt to new challenges, and seamlessly pursue further studies, to remain competitive in the global job market. Recognising this, the EEA Program not only builds practical skills but also fosters life-long learning.

## **Setting students up for success: Contributing strategies**

A strong support system is essential for ensuring student success. In the context of higher education, student success encompasses various outcomes, including academic achievement, retention, completion rates, and the development of skills and attributes that enhance employability and personal growth. This section outlines the integrated teaching, placement, and support strategies that underpin the EEA industry-embedded education model, and demonstrates their respective contributions to student engagement, transition, retention, employability, and long-term success. The EEA approach reflects and extends known good practice in WIL (Patrick et al., 2009), transition pedagogy, and career development learning (Jackson, 2015), while embedding strong student voice and authentic partnership.

### *Teaching methodology and work-integrated learning*

Essendon Education Academy students engage in WIL and structured placements from the outset of their studies. Unlike traditional university models, where placements often occur in later years, EEA students gain industry exposure from Week 1. This approach aligns with university best practices indicating that internships, case studies, and guest lectures are effective strategies for developing technical skills and mentorship, with project-based programs yielding greater knowledge transfer compared to ad-hoc activities (Li, 2024).

A distinctive feature of the EEA curriculum is its integration of real-life sports industry examples. Coursework includes case studies on sports supply and consumer industries, where students explore how businesses manufacture and distribute sports equipment and membership patterns, packages and behaviours, respectively. This approach replaces generic business case studies with relevant industry examples, ensuring students engage with content that directly applies to their interests and future careers.

Research underscores the importance of WIL in preparing students for employment. Studies have shown that students who engage in structured placements are more likely to secure full-time employment and transition seamlessly into their careers. For instance, when evaluating the influence of WIL and paid work during the final year of study, Jackson & Collings (2018) found that such experiences positively impact graduate employment outcomes. By embedding students in professional environments early, the EEA ensures they graduate not just with theoretical knowledge but also with industry experience, confidence, and professional connections that set them apart in the job market. This approach aligns with findings that WIL contributes to the development of employability skills and attributes, enhancing graduates' readiness for the workforce (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017).

### *Placements as pedagogy*

EEA students benefit from immediate access to placement opportunities across EFC's extensive partner network. These placements span various departments (internal, n=16; external, n=3), including Membership, Community, Fan Engagement, Football Operations (across the Australian and Victorian Football League teams in both the Men's and Women's Leagues), and Events, exposing students to diverse industry roles and hands-on experience, preparing them for the dynamic and evolving careers anticipated for Gen Z and Alpha graduates. On average, 93.3 hours per student were completed throughout 2024, though individual experiences vary, with one student demonstrating an outstanding desire to learn and completing 684 hours of placement and subsequently being employed within EFC.

Employers are a prominent community in the higher education landscape through their involvement in WIL, placements, internships, client-based projects, and mentoring programs (Jackson, 2016). As such, placement hosts are not only integral to delivering authentic learning experiences but also serve as potential future employers for students. Placement hosts regularly commend EEA students for their contributions, with feedback playing a crucial role in refining and enhancing the placement experience. Throughout 2024, EEA students were commended for their placement performance across a range of departments, including Data Analytics (*Quote 1; EFC internal placement*), and Events and Customer Service (*Quote 2; Blu Event Productions external placement*), showcasing the variety of pathway opportunities available for students to experience within the EEA Model.

She has been an absolute asset for our programs this year with the efforts she has been putting in. She's been a leader among the EEA students and program, and even the players have been noting the efforts she has been putting in! Her work has been very much appreciated! (Quote 1)

The students that volunteered at *The Long Lunch* were AMAZING! They worked well as a team, had good initiative, were patient and no job was too little. We work with students a lot and have interns all year round and the group demonstrated a good industry standard. (Quote 2)

Student feedback highlights increased confidence, stronger professional networks, and enhanced career clarity as key outcomes of placement experiences. Such opportunities are critical to bridging the cultural disparity between academic and professional environments, where the expectations, norms and values of each setting can differ markedly (Nyström, 2009). Unlike casual term-time employment, placements and WIL provide students with practical exposure to the social and ethical dimensions of their intended profession (Jackson, 2016). Additionally, extra-curricular engagement, such as volunteering and service learning, has been shown to enhance employment outcomes and support identity development through deeper self-reflection and exposure to diverse perspectives (Bourner & Millican, 2011). For example, EEA graduate Eva Gallagher (2024) reflected on the impact of her placement experiences:

During Game Day placements, I was able to boost my confidence in communicating with high-end Essendon Members and meet so many lovely people along the way. Completing multiple (placement) hours in many different departments, I was able to recognise and develop skills I would have never been able to gain during regular studies. This opportunity has opened the door for a future I am very excited for.

Her experience is echoed by peers who consistently cite increased motivation, a sense of belonging, and stronger career clarity as key outcomes of their placement experiences. This supports the notion that knowledge about a career is not simply *acquired* by people; rather, it is *constructed* through activity and in interactions with a variety of people (Piazza, 2011).

### *The innovative learning environment: Studying at a football club*

Beyond the curriculum and placement opportunities, the EEA model offers multiple layers of educational support to enrich student learning and professional development. Students benefit from guest speakers and mentorship from industry professionals, drawing on transferable skills from sport to business. For example, since the program's inception, students have engaged with a wide range of industry leaders across sports management, marketing, and business operations. Notably, students have heard from a variety of EFC staff, including the Chief Executive Officer, Chief Operating Officer, General Manager of Football (Men's and Women's), and representatives from each of the Business Administration departments, as well as previous EEA Graduates who have been successful attaining and retaining positions within the Club (n=7). Guest speakers are not exclusively from the Football industry; high performing athletes, coaches, staff and business owners from sports ranging from basketball to jump rope have shared insights with students, along with personnel from the broader yet booming Health and Fitness industry. Collectively, these speakers demonstrate a variety of career opportunities available for students and emphasise the value of network development.

The co-location of a Dual Diploma program within a professional football club is a novel model within the VET-Higher Education landscape, offering students unprecedented immersion in a live industry environment. With classes taught in a dedicated EEA classroom at EFC, students are frequently exposed to high performing people, processes and environments. Immersion in a high-performance sporting environment offers significant benefits to students, notably enhancing academic confidence and overall success. Exposure to such environments may redefine what 'high performance' looks and feels like for the students, and with frequent exposure to a range of highly respected industry staff, students observe and can model the behaviours desired by employers and required to succeed in the industry. Immersion in high performance environments fosters discipline, resilience, and professionalism, attributes directly transferable to academic pursuits. Daum, Daum & Scholten (2024) noted that student-athletes often exhibit comparable or superior academic performance relative to non-athletes, suggesting that the skills developed in sports can positively influence academic outcomes. Although students are not required to be high performing athletes to join the EEA, the program naturally attracts students with a passion for sport and, anecdotally, most current and previous students have been actively involved in sport throughout their lives.

To further support and engage these sport-focused students, the EEA incorporates a dedicated football development program. Beyond skill development, this initiative serves as a powerful vehicle for promoting health and wellbeing and fostering a strong sense of teamwork and community; key elements that enhance both personal and professional growth. When observing peer influences in physical education, Su et al. (2025) found that students adjacent to positive peer models showed significant improvements in their performance, highlighting the impact of the social environment on individual outcomes. By integrating students into a high-performing

sporting environment that simultaneously strives to create an inclusive community, the EEA model cultivates a culture of excellence and motivation, both on- and off- the field, leading to enhanced academic confidence and a greater propensity to pursue further tertiary studies.

### *University pathways and student retention*

One of the key advantages of the EEA is its direct articulation into the Bachelor of Business at RMIT University. Graduates receive course credit, significantly reducing the time and cost required to complete their degree. By having coursework credited, students build confidence in their academic abilities and experience a seamless transition into further study. This structured pathway allows them to enter university with a strong foundation, industry experience, and a clear career direction.

Across the vocational education sector, according to 2023 NCVER data, completions for a Diploma level qualification were 55.9%, whereas 86.8% of students enrolled in the EEA model at the first census date (2024) successfully completed their Dual Diploma qualification. EEA's retention performance also compares favourably to sector and institutional benchmarks. Using internal RMIT University data comparing enrolment data from Day 1 and the census date of Semester 1, the 2024 retention rate for the RMIT Diploma of Business (City Campus) was 73.6%. In comparison, the EEA Dual Diploma program reported a 2024 retention rate of 78.2%, with the 2025 cohort recently achieving a retention rate of 87.5%, underscoring the strong levels of student engagement and support embedded within the EEA model.

Retention refers to the number of students who enrol and continue their studies within the same institution, with first year to second year retention widely used as an indicator of student persistence in Australian universities (Krause & Armitage, 2014). Notably, 25% of 2022-2024 EEA graduates have pursued the Bachelor of Business pathway at RMIT University, leveraging their real-world industry exposure to make informed decisions about their majors and career specialisations. While the cost of the first year of the Bachelor of Business is marginally lower than the EEA program, the value of the Dual Diploma experience is unmatched. Through WIL, industry placements, and hands-on business application, students graduate with stronger professional networks, greater confidence, and a clearer sense of their career trajectory. This structured pathway ensures that students are not just prepared for their next qualification but equipped with the skills, experience, and industry connections to thrive in their careers.

### *Staffing model*

The integration of dedicated industry staff plays a pivotal role in enhancing the student journey beyond the traditional university framework. With dedicated program staff supporting EEA students from both sides of the EFC-RMIT partnership, the collaborative approach ensures that students receive comprehensive support, leveraging both university resources and industry-specific expertise. The EEA's partnership model introduces specialised positions that complement the standard university support system, including a Program Manager, Student Recruitment Lead, and Student Experience Coordinator, employed by EFC.

Central to the student's success, the Student Experience Coordinator's role encompasses the facilitation and coordination of work placements, maintaining strong relationships with industry partners to secure quality placement opportunities and ensure alignment with educational objectives, organising events that foster community building, peer support and a sense of belonging among students, and ensuring industry-specific onboarding requirements are met, thereby smoothing their transition into the professional sporting industry. Perhaps

most importantly, the Student Experience Coordinator implements regular pulse surveys as a structured method for capturing actionable feedback from the student cohorts.

Regular feedback is instrumental in refining educational programs to better meet student needs. Applying a business perspective, students can be viewed as customers, reinforcing the importance of gathering feedback to optimise offerings and increase engagement. The Net Promoter Score (NPS), widely used across industries including tourism (Baquero, 2022) and medical settings (Kinney, 2005), provides a simple yet effective measure of satisfaction and loyalty. In comparison to tertiary business student NPS scores of 36% (Kara et al., 2022), the EEA's peak NPS in 2024 was 67%, reflecting strong student endorsement of the program. However, as Fisher & Kordupleski (2019) note, NPS alone does not indicate where to invest to enhance customer (or student) experience due to its internal and non-competitive focus. To address this, EEA complements NPS with pulse surveys conducted three times per semester, incorporating qualitative questions that invite students to highlight strengths and suggest improvements. Analysis of pulse survey responses throughout 2024 revealed recurring themes of enhanced self-confidence, appreciation of real-world learning, and strengthened peer support networks. By leveraging both quantitative and qualitative feedback, EEA staff analyse and refine their program, ensuring a responsive and student-centred learning environment.

Beyond the dedicated program staff, industry professionals who serve as work placement hosts play a vital role in shaping student success. These mentors provide students with direct exposure to industry practices, combining hands-on skill development with professional guidance that translates classroom knowledge into real-world application, often helping students refine their career aspirations. Together, with the EEA Program Staff, placement hosts have the potential to connect students with professionals in their chosen field, significantly expanding their network and improving their employment prospects post-study.

In fact, EFC's dedication to student development is further evidenced by their commitment to employ two EEA Graduates at the end of each calendar year. The two graduate roles create a unique advantage for EEA students, offering a clear and tangible career pathway within the EFC. By engaging with EFC staff, processes, and culture throughout their studies, students develop a deep familiarity with the organisation, positioning them strongly when applying for these roles. This built-in opportunity serves as a powerful motivator, driving students to fully engage in their coursework, placements, and networking, ultimately fostering a more focused and career-ready learning environment than traditional university programs.

The EEA's staffing model, characterised by dedicated industry roles and specialised university support, creates a holistic and responsive educational environment. This approach not only addresses academic needs but also supports personal development and wellbeing, thereby setting a benchmark for student success in industry-embedded education programs.

### **Scaling the model: Opportunities beyond AFL**

The success of the EEA model demonstrates the scalability of industry-embedded education across various fields. We hypothesise that other sports and industries could successfully implement similar frameworks, providing industry partners with pre-skilled, work-ready graduates—a cost-efficient and effective approach to workforce development. For students, EEA accelerates skill development, fosters industry connections, and provides early-career entry advantages over traditional Diploma of Business or Bachelor of Business graduates.

#### *Other sports*

The evolution of industry-academia partnerships has gained momentum in 2025, with TasTAFE launching a multi-sport collaborative program in partnership with Tasmanian Netball, Cricket, Basketball, and AFL networks. This initiative offers a Dual Diploma of Sport/Diploma of Leadership & Management, reflecting the increasing demand for embedded learning models. Similarly, RMIT's partnership with Cricket Victoria, which replicates the EEA model, and exploratory discussions with Indian cricket representatives illustrate how this approach can create pathways for students with diverse athletic and business aspirations.

While challenges exist, such as overcoming the marketing perception of *"I don't follow footy"*, expanding industry engagement ensures broader accessibility beyond AFL. A key opportunity lies in extending this model to Olympic and Paralympic sports through National Sporting Organisations, where industry-embedded education could address sector-specific workforce gaps. Additionally, comparing revenue and funding structures between professional sports and Olympic/Paralympic sectors would strengthen the case for targeted educational initiatives.

### *Other industries*

Additional potential exists for EEA-like partnership models to be adapted to entertainment and the performing arts (e.g. LiveNation, NICA, Australian Ballet, etc.), where practical experience and networking are key to career success. By embedding students within these industries, similar models could bridge the gap between education and employment, offering real-world pathways that scale from local to international opportunities. Unlike AFL, which has a strong but domestic focus, industries like live entertainment operate on a global stage, providing graduates with access to internationally renowned networks, employers and career pathways.

### **A potential framework for future success**

As major sports clubs, corporations, and government bodies expand their role in lifelong learning, momentum will continue to grow for education-industry partnerships. A tri-sector approach, where industry, academia and Government meet to deliver similar educational programs, offers a powerful framework for enabling student success at scale.

As outlined in the EEA Model, industry partners (such as EFC) contribute real-world expertise by providing facilities, guest speakers, and direct exposure to professional environments, alongside academic institutions (such as RMIT) bring educational rigour through ASQA-approved course delivery, structured learning experiences, and curriculum aligned with evolving workforce needs. Government stakeholders have a critical role to play by offering funding pathways, setting regulatory frameworks, and developing policies that support innovation and access. When aligned, these three pillars create an ecosystem that not only enhances employability and career clarity but also redefines the purpose and impact of tertiary education in an era of dynamic, multi-phase careers.

### **Additional emerging partnership benefits**

The EFC-RMIT partnership continues to deliver emerging benefits beyond core educational outcomes, including diversified revenue streams and amplified social and industry impact. Through the provision of this program at their training facilities, EFC benefits from tuition-based revenue, while RMIT gains access to a broader student base beyond traditional university enrolments. This revenue-share model enhances long-term sustainability by reducing reliance on single funding sources and attracting greater industry investment in education.



Beyond individual growth, EEA students become part of a dynamic community of emerging leaders driving positive change in the sporting industry. Not only have EFC been able to develop and retain employees through the formal Graduate Roles created specifically for the EEA, but other EEA Graduates have been successfully recruited for other roles within the Club. The EEA's mission is to develop an inclusive community of EEA students and graduates who strive to positively impact the sporting industry, encompassing all elements of the sporting industry from grassroots to the highest level, aligning seamlessly with the Club's mission.

For RMIT, as a leading university of impact in the Asia-Pacific region, equipping learners with the skills, knowledge, and connections to succeed is a core priority. The EFC-RMIT partnership has expanded scholarship opportunities within the EEA Program, strengthened industry relationships across the sports sector, and deepened connections with diverse learning communities through the power of sport.

## Conclusion

The EEA Dual Diploma program, created in partnership with EFC and RMIT University, is a proven model for bridging education and industry to drive student success. By embedding students in high-performance environments, integrating hands-on learning from day one, and leveraging strong industry networks, the program delivers graduates who are career-ready, confident, and adaptable in a rapidly evolving workforce. This model is not just about sport; it is a scalable, future-focused approach that can be applied across industries where practical experience and professional connections are key to long-term success. As education evolves to meet the demands of multi-phase careers, programs like the EEA provide a replicable blueprint for student retention, achievement, and workforce integration. The future of education is industry-embedded—this is how we kick goals for student success.

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