



THE ASPIRATIONS AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF WBLQUAL, AN ERASMUS FUNDED PROJECT ON UP-SKILLING WORK BASED LEARNERS THROUGH HIGHER EDUCATION QUALIFICATIONS.

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Abstract

Work Based Learning (WBL) is not a new concept. Authors such as Baud and Solomon [1] have discussed both the concept and practice of learning in the workplace. There has been widespread acceptance of the value of education in the workplace rather than 'training', particularly when academic programmes involve the learner and the employer in the design and delivery of curriculum, thus allowing the specific matching of the employer's strategic needs with the planned development of the learner. This has been described as a 'tri-partite', 'negotiated' approach. Since then however, there has been limited evidence of widespread acceptance or uptake of WBL, either by employers or Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). It is suggested that there remain significant barriers both to the communication of WBL opportunities, and to the implementation of WBL academic programmes. The WBLQUAL [2] project was funded to research into the barriers and enablers of tri-partite, negotiated WBL - from the viewpoints of Employers, Learners and HEI institutions, and to examine how up-skilling work based learners through Higher Education Qualifications can contribute to European Union (EU) objectives.

WBLQUAL involved partners from 5 EU countries (Led by the UK, and involving partners from Denmark, Italy, Poland, Latvia). Each partner led a research 'work package', focusing on Employer, Student and HEI viewpoints, and from an economic sector (leisure and tourism). It is intended that each partner will present results from their work package during the WBL 'section' of the conference.

The research methods involved primary research using questionnaires, in depth interviews and case studies, supported by literature reviews. By integrating findings from across the EU the project was able to analyse and identify common factors, as well as country specific issues relevant to WBL.

This paper will describe the context and the aspirations of the WBLQUAL project, and how it relates to EU objectives. It will describe the main project activities and deliverables, thereby setting the scene for the related presentations in the WBLQUAL conference section.

Keywords: Education, Work based Learning, HE reform, Widening participation, Education and Employability

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper belongs to a series of publications regarding tripartite view on WBL, is based on investigations reported in ([X], [Y], [Z]) and together with [18], [19], [20], [21], [22] and [23] forms 'WBLQUAL' sections of the conference devoted to the results of the Erasmus multilateral project "An Approach to Qualifications through Negotiated Work Based Learning for the EU - WBLQUAL" [9], project Number: 510022-LLP-1-2010-1-UK-ERASMUS-ECUE.

In 2001 Boud and Soloman described WBL as:

"one of the few innovations related to teaching and learning that is attempting to engage seriously with the economic, social and educational demands of our era..." [1]



There is no doubt that since 2001 the economic, social and educational demands have changed dramatically, and now pose serious questions about future directions not only in the UK but across the EU. The role of Universities (HEIs) in contributing to these challenges, and the need for educational opportunities to be extended to those already in the workplace has also been long recognised:

“ In a fast-changing and increasingly competitive world, the role of higher education in equipping the labour force with appropriate and relevant skills, in stimulating innovation and supporting productivity and in enriching the quality of life is central. The benefits of an excellent higher education system are far-reaching; the risk of decline is one that we cannot accept.” [14]

In 2006 the UK Leitch report drew attention to the need for workforce up skilling, and the potential consequences for ignoring this need. In the same report, it was identified that UK employers were investing in workforce up skilling, to the value of £17.4 billion, but only a tiny proportion (10%) of this was spent with HEIs. Leitch blamed this on a “supply driven approach” and urged HEIs and government agencies to move towards a “demand led” approach.

“To achieve a skills system that adds economic value, the Review recommends a simplified demand-led skills system with employers and individuals having a strong and coherent voice.” [10]

It was in this context that Staffordshire University (SU) embarked upon a key partnership with the IT division of a well known company to form a strategy for work force up skilling through a recognised academic qualification. This partnership had at its heart a “tri-partite” approach, i.e. a continuous dialogue between Employer, Learner and HEI, with the shared goal of creating a programme that meets the needs of the learner, while aligning the curriculum with the strategic needs of the organisation, to the long term benefit of all parties.

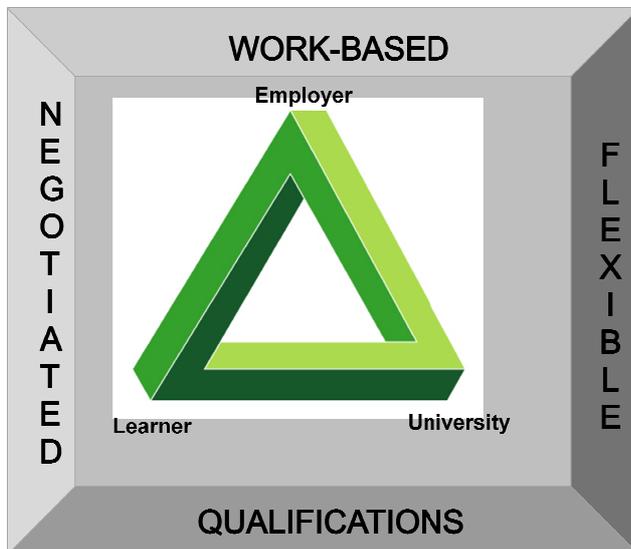
Initially, there was some ‘cultural’ resistance to the accreditation of awards seen as “too vocational”. This may have been predictable in the light of previous studies:

“Work-focused courses at these levels have suffered from social and cultural prejudice against vocational education. Employers claim that they want graduates whose skills are better fitted for work; but the labour market premium they pay still favours traditional three-year honours degrees over two-year work-focused ones. We must break this cycle of low esteem....” [14]

While WBL is a term that has many interpretations, the tri-partite approach described above complies with the description found in Boud 2001, in that it is a form of WBL that takes place within a partnership between educational institution and another enterprise, which meets the needs of learners, and contributes to the longer term development of the organisation, and is formally accredited as a University course. It is also a form of WBL that aligns with the 6 characteristics of WBL given by Boud. In summary these are:

1. Partnership exists between HEI and organisation
2. Learners are employed by the organisation
3. Work is the curriculum
4. Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) determines ‘entry point’
5. Organisational and individual goals are linked
6. Assessed as HE qualification (Boud 2001).

Figure 1. The tri-partite approach to up-skilling work based learners through academic qualifications:



During recent years, it has become increasingly clear that WBL and workforce up-skilling is a major objective of the EU Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP). Erasmus multilateral projects (2007-2010) were subdivided into 4 sub-actions: Curriculum Development, Modernisation of Higher Education, Cooperation between universities and enterprises, and Virtual Campuses. It seemed that learning from the implementation of the NF award had the potential to contribute in all of the following EU initiatives:

- The Bologna Declaration [3]
- The Higher Education Modernisation Agenda [4]
- Europe 2020 Strategy for Smart, Sustainable and Inclusive growth [5]
- New skills for new jobs: better matching and anticipating labour market needs [6]
- Concrete future objectives of education systems [7]

1.1 Background to the Project Bid

In 2006, Staffordshire University (SU) in the UK successfully collaborated with a well known UK Public Limited Company (PLC), to develop an approach for the up skilling of their IT staff, through an academic programme, using the principle of negotiated learning – a tri-partite approach, where employer, learner and HEI work together to develop academic content that is academically rigorous, but is also career focused, and employer relevant [8]. The qualifications offered to the work based learners (WBLs) were based on credit accumulation, within a validated set of awards, coming under an umbrella title of a “Negotiated Framework”.

Through this innovative and ground breaking approach - i.e. using University qualifications to deliver up skilling linked to the strategic objectives of the host employer, SU was able to expand the number and range of similar University/Industry partnerships. More contracts followed, mainly with large, public sector organisations, and primarily focused on in IT and engineering qualifications.

However, the experience gained during the implementation of the NF highlighted a number of challenges to the culture and embedded attitudes of the organisation. As the award progressed it was also clear that there were major mismatches between administrative policies and procedures, which supported traditional students, but were not ideally suited to the needs of WBLs.



In time, this led to the submission of an Erasmus LLP bid (WBLQUAL) [x] in 2010. The simple aspiration of the project began with some very straightforward questions:

1. Could we gather evidence that supported the validity of the tri-partite approach?
2. Would this approach be relevant to EU context?
3. Could it be applied to meet specific needs of industry/ sectors?
4. Could we identify and overcome some of the problems that hindered the implementation of the tri-partite approach?

These were eventually refined into the following objectives:

- To produce a more effective way of improving the skills and behaviours of work based employees, through the use of academic WBL programmes.
- To produce evidence for the relevance and viability of the (tripartite) approach, and improve employer and employee knowledge and confidence in WBL qualifications by linking employer strategic objectives and staff development and mapping academic curriculum to this.
- To improve HEI confidence by addressing issues of academic robustness, integrity of assessment, accreditation of prior learning, etc.
- To provide a platform for future collaboration between employers and HEIs for skills development and for a broader range of learners to be able to participate in higher level qualifications.

Our target audiences were identified as:

- Employees and vocational learners who want to combine and complement their occupation based training with a recognised academic qualification;
- Employers who can be shown the benefit to their enterprises of developing their employees using a framework that ensures learning fit with their strategic aims;
- Employer organisations that can be enlisted to help to promote the framework particularly into the SME sector;
- National and EU government educational and employer bodies (e.g. Learning and Skills Council, Higher Education Funding Council for England), who can make or influence policy in education in the workplace.
- University sector across the EU who want to engage with employers and innovate new work-based qualifications programmes.

3. RESEARCH APPROACH

The partners selected for the project were:

- ▶ Staffordshire University (SU) in UK
- ▶ Centro Studi Ed Initiative Europeo (CESIE) in ITALY
- ▶ Rigas Techniska Universitate (RTU) in LATVIA
- ▶ Uniwersytet Lodzki (ULO) in POLAND
- ▶ University of Southern Denmark (SDU) IN DENMARK

All partners brought their relevant experience to the project. SU had the experience of the NF awards, RTU and ULO were experienced with other forms of WBL, ULO in Business and RTU in IT/Technical areas. SDU contributed expertise in the Danish Leisure and Tourism Sector, and CESIE contributed their extensive experience as an NGO of EU projects and working with widening participation/ non-traditional students.

To achieve objectives it was decided to investigate the views of the three players in the tri-partite relationship – the Employer, Learner and the HEI. A work package was written around each of these three stakeholders, and each work package was led by a different partner. It was assumed that there would be little knowledge of the tri-partite approach, or NF qualifications, but through questionnaires, interviews and cases studies in each of the partners, we could make a detailed analysis of the expectations of these ‘stakeholders’, first in a

country specific context, and then summarising common issues in a pan-European report. These reports can be found on the project website www.wblqual.com

Typically investigations took the form of surveys, distributed and analysed using on-line survey tools. These were followed up with individual interviews, focus groups and case studies where appropriate. All research was conducted in each partner language, and analysed in a national context before the results were collated to establish common themes, and learnings, which were then detailed in a summary report giving a wider, pan – European view. The analysis of the data from these three work packages then allowed the formulation of a view if the tri-partite negotiated approach would work in the EU. An investigation into the needs of a specific industry sector was executed by SDU, who carried out focused, in depth interviews and case studies in the Danish Tourism and Leisure sector.

The investigation of barriers and enablers in HEIs turned out to be a greater part of our project than anticipated, since our interviews with HEIs in the partner countries led to the emergence of common themes of barriers and enablers to the implementation of WBL. As expected, there was a wide variation in the experience of WBL, with the Polish and Latvian Universities having virtually no experience of this type of programme, while Denmark had some experience of WBL, though not the tri-partite approach to WBL. Because of this imbalance, a more extensive study of the policies, processes and practices was carried out at the UK partner, including follow up interviews with senior managers at the strategic level of the HEI. Thus insight was gained as to whether there would be value in the future development of this type of programme, and what precursor activities would be necessary before such programmes could be developed, or optimised.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Detailed findings from the Employer, Learner and HEI workpackages will be given in the following complementary presentations given by each of the partners, so detailed findings will not be discussed here.

Table 1: Related Conference Papers - Results from WBLQUAL, an EU funded project

Partner	Conference Paper
SU	The Aspirations and Achievements of WBLQUAL, An Erasmus funded project on up-skilling work based Learners through Higher Education Qualifications
CESIE	Employers' View On Work Based Learning
RTU	Value Added Performance And Its Recognition In The Workplace
ULO	Strategic, Tactical And Operational Considerations For Academia Involvement Into Work-Based Learning
SDU	Work Based Higher Learning (WBL) For The Danish Tourism Sector
SU	Work-Based Learning For Enhancing Employee Skills: Lessons From The Literature And Practice In A UK HEI.

It is appropriate however, to discuss an overview of our findings, which were rich and diverse.

In our ambition to produce a more effective way of improving the skills and behaviours of work based employees, through the use of academic WBL programmes, we have achieved a partial success. Certainly our project has identified what academic programmes have to offer to work force up skilling, and our findings can contribute to the discussion of how WBL might be made more effective. This is however some way from 'producing' a 'more effective way' as we hoped.



In our further objectives our results were more positive. We have produced evidence for the relevance and viability of the (tripartite) approach, and our findings show that employer and employee knowledge and confidence in WBL qualifications are improved when employer strategic objectives and staff development are linked, and academic curriculum is mapped to this.

Our research into HEIs and the cultural and administrative barriers to effective WBL partnerships have essentially identified more questions than provided answers. However, through in depth interviews with Senior Managers within HEIs there are recommendations on how to improve HEI confidence by addressing issues of academic robustness, integrity of assessment, accreditation of prior learning, etc.

Finally the ambition to provide a platform for future collaboration between employers and HEI'S for skills development and for a broader range of learners to be able to participate in higher level qualifications will be dependent on our ability to disseminate our key messages to the target audiences. For many employers this will be introducing the concept of negotiated learning – simply changing the mindset from 'training' to 'education', and forming a willingness to begin a conversation with Universities around the theme of work force up skilling.

For learners the key message will be about opportunities and benefits of development and education – the key principles of 'lifelong learning' bringing about benefits to the individual, the employer, and to society.

For HEIs there are many messages, first in recognising the changing role and responsibilities of HEIs and the part they play in the economic and social 'health' of their local and national populations.

Our target audience of Employers, Learners, HEIs, and Education Policy Makers has remained the same, but several main points that have emerged as the project has progressed:

- There is an emerging vision of employer / HEI collaboration as an integral part of workforce up skilling, so WBLQUAL messages must be 'synergised' and not 'stand alone'.

"Make education and training more flexible and more open for innovation and enhance relationships between skills providers and employers... Education and training can be effective and innovative if the institutions themselves are innovative, 'learning organisations' open to interactions with the world of business and work." [2]

"...HEIs have developed mechanisms to stimulate and respond to employer demand; however, these are not yet fully embedded in their entire operations and further transition is required if the institutional culture is to be fully aligned with the workforce development agenda." [13]

- Our target audiences are a diverse set of people, and the dissemination strategy must accommodate this
- The message for these audiences is quite focused, and must be tailored to their interests
- Our dissemination strategy must allow a sustainable, post-project legacy, to ensure maximum benefit.

In order to publicise our findings as widely as possible, the dissemination strategy has involved the

- Production of academic papers and conference workshops
- Videos, flyers and web site designed for each type of stakeholder
- Local events, tailored to the country specific context and reaching the local stakeholders.

Part of the dissemination strategy is the set of papers presented at this "section", where the other partners in the WBLQUAL project will discuss in full their contribution to the project outcomes.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As the project progressed it has become apparent that the WBL experience of each partner differs widely, and in particular, the understanding and application of the concept of the 'negotiated, tri-partite approach'



covers a spectrum of experience, with the partners UK and Denmark having most experience of HEI employer partnerships of this type. There is also a suggestion that at an institutional level, ULO in Poland is receptive to the concepts of the tri-partite approach, and may be at the start of a journey into this 'arena' using their extensive industry links. Partners in Italy and Latvia have concluded however, that there are many national barriers to the implementation of this type of partnership, and that there is a considerable resistance to overcome before the tri-partite approach could become accepted form of Work force up skilling in their national context.

During the life of this project it has become clear that the benefits of a link between education, skills and labour force development has become widely accepted, and the need for HEI engagement in this field is even more pressing. While there are undeniable economic pressures on educational institutions across the EU, it is hoped that this project will demonstrate the value of adopting the approach described here:

"In order to ensure that the qualifications people obtain are actually of value to them on the labour market, and so that employers can employ people who possess the skills they need, cooperation between 'work' and 'education and training' should be much more intensive and more substantial. These two worlds need to address and overcome existing barriers between them and understand that only a joint approach will deliver what people really need and want..... A more flexible, responsive education and training system is good for learners, good for employers, good for the economy and good for the community(ies) it serves. It will help balance the labour market and ensure that individuals and employers acquire the skills they need." [2]

But it is important to remember that our goals are not only monetary. Higher Education changes lives, and it is worth keeping the following vision in mind:

"Our schools, universities, training and workplaces will foster equal opportunities, entrepreneurship, trust, co-operation, and a sense of responsibility, creativity and innovation that will contribute to economic prosperity, societal good, engaged citizenship and personal well-being..... Our schools, universities, training and workplaces will foster equal opportunities, entrepreneurship, trust, co-operation, and a sense of responsibility, creativity and innovation that will contribute to economic prosperity, societal good, engaged citizenship and personal well-being." [2]

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