



WORK-BASED LEARNING FOR ENHANCING EMPLOYEE SKILLS: LESSONS FROM THE LITERATURE AND PRACTICE IN A UK HEI

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Abstract

The paper examines briefly the context within which WBL in general has developed in the UK and discusses some of the factors that have influenced WBL in the UK particularly in UK Government initiatives and legislation. It then reviews some prominent examples of WBL programmes in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that have been developed as a response to such initiatives. A more detailed description on one of these successful programmes in a UK HEI is offered and an analysis is made of some of the factors which have contributed to its success. Finally, conclusions are drawn and suggestions are made for further improvements in practice that can be applied generally to improve the 'learner journey' through WBL in other centres and other EU countries.

The paper belongs to a series of publications regarding tripartite view on WBL. It is based on investigations reported in [22] and together with [23], [24], [25], [26], and [28] forms the conference section 'WBLQUAL' devoted to the results of the project 'An Approach to Qualifications through Negotiated Work Based Learning for the EU – WBLQUAL' [22], project Number: 510022-LLP-1-2010-1-UK-ERASMUS-ECUE.

The Project WBLQUAL, its aim, objectives, and methodology are described in [2] while the rest of the 'WBLQUAL' section papers focus on particular aspects of tripartite view on WBL.

The main objective of the research presented in this paper is to answer the question "Can lessons be learned for the EU WBL community from practice in UK HEIs?"

Keywords: Work-based learning, higher education, negotiated framework, added value.

1. INFLUENCES ON WBL IN THE UK

There have been a number of initiatives Government and non-governmental organisational initiatives that were intended to change the relationship between education and the workplace. It has been recognised for some time that the academic skills that are developed through conventional HE programmes in the UK university sector are not necessarily those that are required in the workplace [1]. Equally, it has been recognised that many individuals in the UK workforce have not been able to take advantage of 'conventional' full-time educational opportunities but their practical abilities have taken them into positions where they would now benefit from the transferable competences that well-designed HE programmes can provide [2]. In the UK, although 42% of 18-30 year olds participate in higher education, the HE sector appears to show little interest in others, particularly those in work [5]. In the workplace, there appears to be an assumption that all that is needed is 'job skills' (i.e. practical instruction in a narrow range of workplace skills). This policy is expensive as, 'In England, employers spend around £2.4 billion on direct course costs and up to £17.4 billion in total, excluding the wages of employees' (Leitch Review Page 12) [3].

At the same time, UK universities have developed more full-time programmes in response to Government initiatives to increase the proportion of the younger population in HE [4]. Research suggests however, that this is, '...not a deliberate policy but rather an unintended consequence of the concern to maintain global competitiveness and hence wealth creation by increasing the number of graduates available year on year to the UK labour market, giving more people the opportunity to enter the market place at degree level' [5].



The Leitch Review of Skills stated in 2006 that, 'Without increased skills, we would condemn ourselves to a lingering decline in competitiveness, diminishing economic growth and a bleaker future for all. The case for action is compelling and urgent...Becoming a world leader in skills will enable the UK to compete with the best in the world' [3]. The Leitch Review concluded that demographic, technological and global changes present both challenges and opportunities. The review highlighted the need to balance the interests of the employer and the individual employee (i.e. learner), develop a coherent funding support system, and ensure greater equality in access to employment and training [6]. The influence of the Leitch Review has been reflected in HEIs WBL and specifically the emphasis on workforce development [7], although the ability of UK industry and HE sector to respond effectively to the review has been questioned [7].

The first *Ambition 2020* report published by UK commission for employment and skills [8] assessed the UK's progress towards its ambition of being one of the top 8 countries in the world for skills, jobs and productivity. UKCES found that in 2010 the UK was just short of being world class in terms of employment (where it was ranked 10th); and productivity (it was ranked 11th). Despite significant progress in skills development in recent years, the UK was ranked 12th, 18th and 17th on high level, intermediate and low level skills respectively among OECD countries. The report concluded that by 2020 the UK's relative position would barely have improved and whilst it would be closer to being world class on higher level skills, its position on intermediate and low level skills may actually deteriorate [9]. It is suggested from this that WBL can form a part of a wider initiative to change the relationship between industry and employers, employees and the HEI sector.

2. BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH

The 1987 UK Government White Paper on HE presented the case for widening access to a more vocationally relevant HE and created the framework for a series of reforms and future developments in HE [10]. These developments were based on the belief that HE, and the qualifications it provides, will be of value to a much wider cross-section of society. While the nature of HE undergoes important changes based on the same policy, the content of educational programmes changed as new vocationally-oriented curriculum areas emerged and the traditional academic disciplines appeared to be less dominant [11]. These changes placed a greater emphasis on 'flexibility' which includes a wider range of modes of provision, which entails part-time, distance learning, and WBL modes [12]. This is how WBL emerged as a distinguishable feature of UK HE provision and was supported by a number of funding initiatives that were designed to encourage a learning society, rather than direct policy directives [13]. There has been a considerable amount of investment in human capital and the creation of a more flexible and adaptable workforce in the EU agenda since 1990 [14]. This was followed by the European Year of Lifelong Learning in 1996 which emphasised skills, competencies and training of individuals [6].

Findings from research by Algren *et al.* [6] suggests that although businesses offered employees educational opportunities yielding recognised HE qualifications, traditional patterns tended to prevail, in which highly educated employees had greater prospects to gain further portable or transferable qualifications, while low-skilled employees were more likely to participate in workplace courses or in-house job-specific training. As many managers in the study by Algren *et al.* [6] viewed cost as the greatest barrier to employee development and training, the opportunities for low to medium-skilled employees to gain portable qualifications are likely to decrease further during periods of recession, thus decreasing the chances for low-skilled workers to compete in an insecure labour market. This problem may be reduced through having clear policies which cover all levels of human capital development.

3. CURRENT WBL INITIATIVES IN UK HEIs:

Studies have explored learning from many angles and in many disciplines and on a European as well as UK stage [15] [16] [17]. It has been reported that national government initiatives such as apprenticeships and the social mobility strategy, '*Opening Doors, Breaking Barriers*' [18] have failed to become integral components of further education and HE policies. Research identifies a lack of employer awareness of Higher Education (HE) as an instrument of workforce development and awareness of the potential of WBL. The perception that the HE sector is out of touch [19] and is unresponsive to employer needs [20] continues to act as a barrier to HE engagement with employers [4]. However, considerable effort has been made to develop WBL



programmes, particularly by universities such as Middlesex, Anglia Ruskin, Coventry, Staffordshire, Derby, Glamorgan and Northumbria, in spite of the lack of clear policy directives from governmental agencies with responsibility for business, skills, education and learning [4].

The paper now examines briefly some of the WBL initiatives that have been developed in some UK HEIs in response to these initiatives and relevant legislation.

Middlesex University

Middlesex Organisational Development Network (MODNet) claims to be the first HEI-led network focusing on engagement with employers in the UK. The network involved national governmental training providers, Further Education Institutes (FEIs) and private training providers, collaborating to address the learning needs of the UK public, private and voluntary sectors. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) supported the MODNet initiative, which led to the foundation of the Institute for Work Based Learning at the University's Hendon Campus in North London. The Institute claims to work in partnership with clients across a wide range of industries to create bespoke staff development programmes that tackle a wide range of organisational challenges, specifically at the UG and PG level. The Institute's 'Beyond Training' portfolio provides a range of academically accredited WBL programmes for general staff development as well as the education of key individuals in the workplace. For the more advanced practitioner the Doctorate in Professional Studies provides an individual programme for senior managers and leaders wishing to develop themselves and their practice through assessed academic study.

As an example of the professional work that the Institute undertakes, a two-year pilot study examined different ways of assessing the competence of would-be solicitors at the training contract stage. The evaluation report found that the pilot award had been successful in assuring quality. The report makes a number of recommendations that are also relevant to the WBLQUAL study, including:

- The prior articulation of the learning outcomes that are necessary to show competence;
- The consideration of a credit system to assess incremental learning and to open the door to more flexible routes to qualification and transfer;
- The retention and development of the portfolio as a learning journal
- The training of key professionals in coaching and assessment within a WBL framework;
- Widening participation through an accredited learning scheme for prior learning;

These recommendations are typical of academically accredited negotiated WBL programmes in the UK.

Coventry University

The WBL programmes at Coventry University in the UK midlands focus on UG courses in Management Development and Social Cohesion and a Foundation in Assistive Technology Unlike some competing programmes that require learners to be 'off site' at some time during working hours, the Coventry programmes claim to require a maximum of six days away from work over an academic year and use blended learning techniques to enable distance learning. The University claims to be a minimum disruption in the workplace and to learners and their employers. All three programmes use blended learning techniques for delivery and the learning pattern consists of three basic elements:

- Face to face contact with tutors at the University over six days spread through the year;
- Monthly half-day group discussions with 5-6 fellow learners and tutor in Action Learning;
- Meetings and online support using the University's virtual learning environment (VLE).

It is claimed that the emphasis of WBL at Coventry University is on developing a learning community where learners and staff learn together in an informal network. This approach may be said to characterise WBL initiatives in the UK.



University of East London

WBL at the University of East London claims to provide learners with the opportunity to achieve a recognised university qualification that is directly related to the requirements of their job that enable learners to fit their studies around their employer's work patterns. WBL at the University of East London claims to provide solutions to the workforce development needs of businesses and providing effective employer engagement through negotiated WBL programmes. The WBL awards on offer by the University of East London include a part-time Foundation Degree in Professional Development, the BA (Hons) Applied Professional Studies programme, which is designed specifically for learners who have successfully completed the FdA Professional Development (FDPD) and who wish to obtain an award with Honours.

Both short WBL courses and 'full programmes' are offered by the University of East London, which claims:

- A higher-level (i.e. undergraduate or postgraduate) level qualification with a choice of subject areas;
- Learning aligned to personal and professional career objectives;
- Learning outcomes negotiated between the learner, the University and the employer;
- Study patterns and learning at a pace to suit the learner;
- Recognition of previous learning and work experience (i.e. accreditation of prior learning and experience or APEL);
- Experienced staff to guide and support through blended learning methods.

Again, the above list shows that the programmes offered by the University of East London typify WBL initiatives in the UK, by emphasising negotiation between learners, employers and the HEI, flexibility of study and the use of APEL. The specific mention of experienced staff may also be significant.

Anglia Ruskin University

Anglia Ruskin University's WBL project, now called 'Degrees at Work', was founded in 2009 as a direct result of a successful Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Social Development Fund bid. Anglia Ruskin University claims to have been giving major UK companies the opportunity to upgrade the skills of their workforce without their staff spending time away from their workplace and by undertaking 'real' work-based projects, learners can give their employer 'added value'. The academic areas presently offered include leadership management, healthcare and social studies. Some of the course content will be based around the learner's day-to-day work allowing new learning to be applied directly to their job. Anglia Ruskin University claims that employers favour WBL because it improves their business performance through staff development with minimal disruption to their operations. In turn, it is claimed that employers measure real improvements in their business performance and that business is enhanced with 'added value'. Some of the claims made for the Anglia Ruskin University WBL awards are:

- Negotiated design and delivery of courses;
- Addressing employers' workforce development needs through the provision of work-based UG courses;
- Actively using the workplace as a learning environment to achieve specific individual, team and organisational objectives;
- Programmes delivery depends on the company learning culture, which can include distance learning, tutor supported e- learning, work-place seminars, weekend or evening classes, or blended learning.

These points also stress the key components of WBL according to the WBLQUAL definition; namely negotiation between employers, learners and HEIs, learning from work in the workplace, planned workforce development and flexible, customised learning methods.

Staffordshire University

Staffordshire University has negotiated WBL initiatives with major organisations such as the UK National Health Service, the Royal Air Force, Staffordshire Police and Britvic Plc, an international fast-moving consumer goods company. WBL initiatives within the University are mostly focused on Healthcare, Business and Management, Engineering and Computing. Staffordshire University is a member of a consortium of four universities which work in partnership with the Royal Air Force to deliver industry-recognised qualifications



for service personnel. The Royal Air Force required WBL courses that were flexible and relevant and that took previous learning into account through APEL. It was important that learning credits could be accumulated and carried on to higher levels of learning. The WBL programmes also needed to be flexible enough to accommodate service personnel changing their operating bases or being posted abroad, often at short notice. In response to the Force's clearly articulated needs, bespoke Foundation Degrees were developed in Leadership and Management and Aeronautical Engineering that conform to the very specific requirements. Delivery of the WBL is offered on a mixed in-house and distance learning basis, and the option to progress to an Honours degree is built into the programme. The high numbers of RAF personnel to have enrolled reflects the value placed on these qualifications. Service personnel understand the qualifications enhance promotion prospects and career opportunities, and the RAF understands that investing in training is an effective staff-retention tool

The partnership with Staffordshire Police began in 2002, when a need for Leadership Development in the force was identified. Staffordshire University developed bespoke, flexible programmes that include one-day events, guest speakers, coaching and master classes for staff who cannot commit to the whole programme. The WBL programme leads to a Graduate Certificate and membership of the Chartered Institute of Management. So far, over 630 members of the force, (both officers and civilians) have taken part and the force has measured impact of the work-based projects in financial as well as social terms. Individual work-based projects to date have secured partnership funds of £54,000 (to provide additional policing for a hospital complex) and projected savings of £119,000 over a five-year period (for mobile telephone forensics). All participants on the course report were judged to have acquired new skills in a range of areas relevant to the force's needs. In February 2008, Staffordshire Police were named by the Audit Commission as the top performing police force in the country for the use of resources in policing and in October 2008 Staffordshire Police Force won a National Training Award Scheme National Award for Partnership Approach to Training, recognising the close and sustained links between the two organisations.

Britvic Soft Drinks is one of the UK and Europe's leading soft drink manufacturers with operations across the UK, Eire and France. When the company recognised that developing the full potential of its IT employees was important for supporting its ambitious IT-supported growth strategy, Staffordshire University (which had existing links with Britvic through consultancy and student employment) was contacted and the Britvic IT Academy was set up to integrate. The close understanding between Professor Hanifa Shah of the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Technology and Rob Pritchard, Britvic's Head of IT Planning and Governance, to design a series of Academy workshops. These were so successful that it was possible to link Britvic's staff development requirements to an HE academic framework. This framework recognises employees' previous qualifications, learning and experience (APEL), and enables them to study for an award at an appropriate level and relevant to Britvic's needs (negotiation). These courses are flexible and use a combination of e-learning, IT Academy activities and work-based learning projects. In other words, the WBL programmes at Staffordshire University demonstrate very similar characteristics to the other initiatives in the other UK HEIs. It is important to identify what these characteristics are.

4. LESSONS FROM WBL IN PRACTICE

It is now possible to draw some lessons for WBL in general in a European as well as a UK perspective from the experience of HEIs and HE practitioners in WBL. From the above examples of WBL provision in the UK HEIs, it may be concluded that successful WBL programmes tend to have the following characteristics and the authors' experiences suggest that lessons can be learned from the WBL programmes that can be transferred to other HEIs and other countries and may be generally useful in improving the effectiveness of WBL:

4.1 There must be academic rigour as well as 'added value'



The WBL in these programmes involves formally agreed and accredited programmes of academic study (i.e. they are validated by a HEI and/or professional body). In other words, work is the curriculum and the work that is assessed is essentially practical, but the learning and assessment processes are soundly academic and are underpinned by the usual HE quality assurance processes. The modules and awards that make up the programmes are subject to internal and external validation and the assessments and the assessment processes are also overseen internally and externally. The outcomes of the process are therefore comparable with those of conventional academic programmes in typical HEIs. The authors' experience with WBL suggests that the work produced by the work-based learners is of a consistently higher standard than that of 'conventional' part-time students at the same level of learning. The reasons for this are beyond the scope of this paper, but may concern the context and relevance of the work, as well as the way it is integrated into the learner's personal development plans. Added value in this context is an example of 'co-creation of value' as all parties to the WBL agreement can see its worth. The employer gains value from the extra creativity and productivity that is attributed to a more motivated and more highly educated workforce, the employee/learner gains added value from higher achievements in the workplace, better career prospects and job satisfaction and the HEI itself gains added value from the experience of 'keeping in touch with industry' and from developing innovative learning materials and methods.

4.2 The employer must have a vision and show initiative in sharing it

Experience suggests that the motivation of the employer to engage in WBL is instrumental in achieving success. It also suggests that employers cannot be 'dragged into' WBL relationships. In many of the examples the WBL involves employer-driven qualifications served by the HEI as the 'academic member' of the relationship. The WBL in many cases involves the university in imposing an academic approach (i.e. reflection, critique and feedback on learning and assessment) on carrying out 'real world' work, in the workplace. For example, in 2006 Britvic had a clear view of what it wanted to achieve in its IT workforce development. It went as far as establishing an IT Academy within the organisation to promote the educational development of its IT staff in response to IT being identified a key point of its ambitious growth strategy. WBL involves employers who wish to promote the education of their employees to close 'skill gaps' and 'up-skill' the workforce as a part of achieving personal and organisational objectives. In WBL the learners and module tutor(s) take responsibility for negotiating the learning and must share readily and quickly in the employer's vision. This is called by Britvic 'DNA' and typifies an approach to staff development that runs throughout the company. For this to work effectively, the HEI at all levels must have a similar vision and appropriate experience. The mode of learning is interaction, rather than just delivery. Prior experience on the part of learners must be acknowledged as valid. The responses and 'follow-up' to initiatives must be quick and straightforward, as is often the case in industry, but not so often in academia.

4.3 The 'negotiated framework' between the parties must be effective

Employer engagement appears to be central to the success of WBL programmes. The WBL initiatives examined here tend to be based on an effective tripartite relationship between the employer, the learner and the HEI. In the authors' experience the success of a WBL programme depends on the strength of the relationship between the employer and HEI at several levels; strategic, tactical and operational. The WBL relationship between Britvic and Staffordshire University, for instance, goes back some seven years and developed from research/consultancy projects and the secondment of a senior member of university staff in the company. This broke down any of the barriers that may have existed between the company and the academic institution and their respective staff. Therefore, a considerable degree of trust existed between the two organisations and their staff. It is therefore recommended that Universities use their industrial contacts to build up close relationships with commercial organisations that can form the basis of tripartite negotiation.

4.4 The HEI must see itself as a 'service partner' not an 'ivory tower'

The literature review (which is reinforced by the authors' personal experience) suggests that HEIs in the UK have increasingly tended to divorce their academic programmes from the needs of employers. This may be attributed to the 'changing landscape of academic awards in the UK, following the conversion of



the former polytechnics to 'new universities'. The polytechnics had a reputation for employer engagement and offering vocationally relevant courses at undergraduate level. Prior to 1992, academic degrees in polytechnics were validated by the UK Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA). The CNAA was set up in 1965 by the UK Government to validate and award degrees and to maintain national QA standards. A CNAA degree was formally recognised as equivalent to a university degree and the courses were under strict scrutiny by assessors external to the polytechnics. Sub-degree courses at polytechnics were validated by the Business & Technology Education Council (BTEC). Polytechnics were often seen as ranking below universities in the provision of HE because they lacked degree-awarding powers, concentrated on applied education for work and had less research than the universities [21]. The implication of this, however, was that in general the awards offered by polytechnics were industrially relevant and that engagement with employers was consequently closer. However, with the move to university status the role of the HEI has become more of a 'degree provider' and less of an 'educator for work'. This has led to a detachment in the HEI/employer relationship. To be effective in WBL the HEI must regard itself as a 'provider of service' to industry. Significantly, the last degree-awarding institution with polytechnic status was Anglia Polytechnic University (which had only attained polytechnic status the previous year) which as a university became known as Anglia Ruskin University from 2005, and which features as one of the leading WBL providers in this paper. It appears that old lessons have been forgotten and a change of attitude on the part of HEIs in the UK is needed to promote WBL.

5 Conclusions

This research behind this paper shows that the success of the negotiated relationship between the employee, employer and HEIs through WBL is crucial to improving the knowledge and skills of the UK workforce. The literature review shows that UK Government is keen to see the UK workforce achieve its full potential. It also shows, however, that attitudes 'in the workplace and classroom' will need to change in order to embrace the new types of employer and learner engagement that are required to make this happen. Many employers are still unaware of the potential of WBL in developing and 'up-skilling' their workforces at all levels. Many HEIs are also slow to accept the changes in attitudes and in practice that are required. Nevertheless, there are some good examples of WBL initiatives in UK universities and their features examined to establish whether there is common 'best practice' that can benefit European employers and HEIs in general. The author's research into the WBL literature and practical experience of developing and delivering WBL programmes suggest that when carried out correctly WBL can be very effective in improving career prospects, up-skilling the workforce and 'adding value' to employees and organisations alike. For this to occur, however, there has to be some 'expectation management' in place, beginning with a sound understanding of the nature and definition of WBL among all parties in the tripartite agreement on which WBL should be based [23].

The WBL initiatives in UK HEs and the interim findings of the Erasmus WBLQUAL research project [28] in five European partner institutions do, in fact, appear to show that successful WBL initiatives in the UK have characteristics that are useful in producing a working definition of WBL that will help in promulgating it to HEIs, employers and learners and disseminating 'best practice' in WBL and offering recommendations and guidance on how best to develop and deliver effective WBL programmes across Europe. It is clear that the UK HEI sector has considerable expertise in developing and delivering negotiated WBL programmes in various areas (the examples are by no means comprehensive) and that a significant number of employers (particularly large-scale organisations) are becoming aware of the benefits and advantages of WBL as a method of workforce development. There is still a lot of scope for the development of negotiated WBL programmes in academic areas and sectors of work that are as yet not widely exploited and among smaller companies. For this to happen successfully, 'under-engaged' HEIs and employers need to be aware of the support for WBL by national governments and the EU, of the potential of WBL for workforce development and as an alternative way of achieving modern academic outcomes. This is what the Erasmus WBLQUAL project is seeking to achieve.



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DISCLAIMER

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