



EMPLOYERS' VIEW ON WORK BASED LEARNING

Results from WBLQUAL, an EU funded project

Luisa Ardizzone

CESIE - European Centre of Studies and Initiatives (ITALY)

luisa.ardizzone@cesie.org, cesie@cesie.org

Abstract

This paper belongs to a series of publications regarding a tripartite view on work-based learning (WBL) and together with [1], [2], [3], [4] and [5] it forms the 'WBLQUAL' sections of the conference devoted to the results of the project financed by the European Commission within the Lifelong Learning Programme framework - "An Approach to Qualifications through Negotiated Work Based Learning for the EU - WBLQUAL" [6].

In line with *Europe 2020 growth strategy*¹ and the *European Employment Strategy*² - adopted by EU leaders in June 2010 -, this paper will present the employers' points of view on the specific work-based learning educational model, so as to develop a deeper and Europe-wide understanding of their expectations and the contextual issues connected to workforce development.

This paper then highlights the benefits for employers of engaging with WBL, and whilst not denying existing barriers at a macro level, it will provide suggestions about how employers could develop a successful cooperation with Higher Education Institutions (HEI) at a micro level.

In other words, this paper is seeking to answer the main research question about what actions can be undertaken by employers so as to foster the cooperation with HEIs in order to be competitive on the market by up-skilling or rather re-skilling their workforce. These are actions that might be feasible especially in those EU contexts where there is still a lack of legislation and recognition of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) leading to formal qualifications.

Keywords: Work Based Learning / Employers' engagement / Workforce development / Strategic benefits of education / Collaborative curriculum.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is probable that in many EU countries there will be a lack of opportunities for undergraduate students in conventional University-based education as revised recruitment and financing models come into effect. It is contended that many of these graduates will need to acquire new qualifications in the workplace or re-orientate their postgraduate education. The WBLQUAL project therefore recognises that another learning environment needs to be developed which can contribute to developing a skilled workforce that is able to meet labour market needs and promote lifelong learning. This can be through work-based learning.

There are various elements that need to be considered before work-based learning can be considered as a valid option in lifelong learning.

¹http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/index_en.htm

²<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=101&langId=en>

Firstly, in order to assess the competences needed to acquire the above mentioned new qualifications, it is essential that employers acknowledge the most suitable tools and methods to observe their employees' performance, so as to measure the effectiveness of performance improvement programmes and respond with offering adequate educational models.

Second, if educational programmes are to align with employer needs, it is also fundamental that HEIs understand the employer perspective regarding workforce development. Therefore there need to be a consultation phase in order to create a collaborative curriculum. This is particularly relevant considering that the Leitmotiv nowadays, for European and worldwide industry and SMEs, is COMPETITIVENESS and this needs to be nurtured and sustained in order for Europe's economy to move ahead.

The more specific objectives of the overall research, not all discussed in this paper but available in the [EMPLOYERS' cross-national Comparative Report](#) [8], are:

- I. To investigate the concepts of value-added work-based development from the employer perspective.
- II. To examine how economic, demographic, political drivers influence organisational attitudes to workforce development, and identify how employers address skills gaps through workforce development.
- III. To evaluate how employers measure and assess workforce performance through formal and informal methods.
- IV. To gather feedback from employers about working with academic programmes.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

By conducting extensive research into each of the three contributing target groups (Employer [8], Learner [9] and HEI) - across 5 EU countries (United Kingdom – UK, Italy - IT, Poland - PL, Denmark - DK, Latvia LV) and acrosstypes of employers of different business sectors (Corporate and Small Medium Enterprises, SMEs) - WBLQUAL aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the issues, incentives and barriers held by the three partners, and to use this understanding to formulate a tri-partite approach to WBL qualifications.

To map the existence of WBL in the countries involved in the project the following investigation tools were employed:

- a) *Country Specific Reports (CSR)* compiled by project partner institutions, focusing on:
 - General socio-economic profile
 - Adult education and Training Programmes
 - Overall situation related to WBL
- b) *Online Questionnaire/Survey* addressed to employers/companies. By taking part in this online survey, the employers³ contributed to an overview of what businesses are already doing within the WBL framework. The Consortium wished to discover what small and medium sized businesses/enterprises actually need in order to define the best way that Universities and HEI could support companies in Europe.
- c) *Case Studies* delivered through interviews with employers that explored the already existing WBL best practices within companies.

These standardized tools ensured both quantitative and qualitative perspectives with the aim of providing a coherent summary and commentary which could be accessible and easy to share with employers in Europe who are often unaware about training possibilities for their employees. Thus hoping to promote and ultimately foster cooperation between the business and academic sectors.

3. FINDINGS / RESULTS

³Includes the employment sector that stays close to the lifelong community and requires specific skills necessary for the competitiveness in their business environment.



In the survey, the UK is represented primarily by medium-sized and large companies, while Italy and Denmark involved mainly SMEs⁴ (on or after 1st August 2008 to claim under the SME scheme

companies must have with fewer than 500 employees which have an annual turnover not exceeding €100m and/or with an annual balance sheet total not exceeding €86m). Poland also is represented largely by SMEs with up to 50 staff members. Unfortunately there are no responses to the survey available from Latvia. In the United Kingdom the total of responses stated that over the past 12 months they have funded or arranged internal training and/or development opportunities for their employees. Highly positive percentages also emerge for Italy and Poland – while Denmark states that fifty percent of opportunities were funded.

The key reasons for this high engagement in training provision, mostly internal, are that the existing staff lack skills or have outdated skills and also the need to encourage young workers in an ageing workforce. The internally provided training opportunities are implemented in all countries with over 50% by a mix between internal and external providers. This 50% of the latter is represented by *Private Training Providers* (UK 26%, IT 40%, PL 43%, DK 40%), *External Consultants* (UK 22%, IT 0%, PL 33%, DK 0%), *Further Education Colleges* (UK 30%, IT 20%, PL 5%, DK 60%) and *Universities* (UK 19%, IT 40%, PL 14%, DK 0%) .

Of the main causes of employees being not fully proficient in their job, employers list the inability of the workforce to keep up with labour market transformations and a lack of motivation (as highlighted also by the Case Studies), so the need for line managers to adopt a new work approach which encourages employees to feel sense of ownership in the company which encourages them to wish to develop.

Turning to the important aspects that would encourage employers to build up training cooperation with universities, HEIs and/or other providers relate to cost effectiveness of trainings, the relevance to the business and that the acquired competences are formally recognized.

At this point it is interesting to note that, according to the survey findings, the most requested competences concern social skills (team work, oral communication, problem solving and customer handling) - in Poland and Denmark a lack of foreign language competencies was also identified. Employers state that a lack of these skills has a negative impact on their business [8] but, on the other hand, these transversal/interpersonal competences are more difficult to assess and to recognize, and are therefore less valued than economic/profit aspects.

N.B. Employers and Learners could refer to the Key Competences for lifelong learning as defined in the *European Reference Framework*⁵ to overcome the social skills and competences' identification and assessment difficulties:

"(...) Key Competences are seen as combination of knowledge, skills and attitude that all individuals need for personal fulfilment and development, active citizenship, social inclusion and employment".⁶

⁴(...)more than 99% of all European businesses are, in fact, SMEs (see [definition of SMEs](#)). They provide two out of three of the private sector jobs and contribute to more than half of the total value-added created by businesses in the EU. Moreover, SMEs are the true back-bone of the European economy, being primarily responsible for wealth and economic growth, next to their key role in innovation and Research & Development. What is even more intriguing is that nine out of ten SMEs are actually micro enterprises with less than 10 employees. Hence, the mainstays of Europe's economy are micro firms, each providing work for two persons, in average.

⁵http://www.bis.gov.uk/assets/biscore/corporate/migratedD/publications/D/DIUS_RR_08_17

⁶http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/key_en.htm

⁶http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/publ/pdf/ll-learning/keycomp_en.pdf pag.5

to then consider to use the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) to better understand and compare the qualifications levels of the different education and training systems so to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe.⁷

3.1. BARRIERS TO COOPERATION

Employers criticize HEIs mainly for their limited consideration of employer's needs, lamenting that university departments do not have suitable processes in place to find out industry's requirements and to respond effectively.

Two contributory factors are the existing difficulties of different University faculties to cooperate together in order to respond to the expectations of employers who look for work-based contents that

include interdisciplinary and flexible training packages that require cross-faculty cooperation. Moreover, the lack of experience of academic staff of industry working environments and their often poor ability to link "ideal theoretical" knowledge suitably to reality is also a hindering element.

Another issue is the lack of a qualification commission within Universities which is able to evaluate previous experience and grant a degree/qualification so as to shorten the timeframe of the in-service learning programmes addressed to workforce.

Through the case studies, employers state also that the few work-oriented training opportunities that HEIs offer often apply unappealing adult teaching methodologies that do not promote the creation of a stimulating learning environment that could increase the learners' motivation. These reasons lead employers to opt rather for internal courses or self-guided studies instead of looking for co-operation with HEIs.

Contextual factors that play a role as restrictive obstacles for WBL were also identified in the Country Specific Reports;

Firstly, the lack of legislation specifically related to WBL represents a common denominator for all the countries. A particular case is the Italian situation: the Law n. 388/2000, art. 118 (Joint Multi Sectoral Funds for continuing training) represents a very important tool for financing training plans within companies, if it wasn't just a suggestion!: "In order to promote the development of the continuous vocational educational, may be instituted funds in any economic sector of industry, agriculture, service and craft". In some partner countries the lack of recognition of competences and of an institutionalized national training and validation system is an additional issue. UK is the best example of competence recognition as accreditation of Prior Learning/Experience is on place. Other countries such as Italy and Poland still lack this aspect at a national level. Also worth mentioning as another context-related reason that contribute to poor engagement with WBL or other similar educational programmes is the volatile nature of the present job markets, so that the lack of job stability hinders employers from offering systematic training opportunities.

Several of the above major individual, institutional and contextual barriers to the introduction of innovative educational models, like WBL courses could represent, have been addressed by a range of EU policy papers highlighting the importance of *learning through, in and at workplace*, such as: the Commission's 2001 *Communication Making a European area of lifelong learning a reality*; the 2002 Council Resolution on lifelong learning (European Commission, 2001; Council of the European Union, 2002); and the 2010 *Communication A new impetus for European Cooperation in VET to support the EU 2020 strategy* (European Commission, 2010d). WBLQUAL aligns with the European Commission Communication "*It is never too late to learn*" that recalls the contribution of adult learning to employability, mobility in the labour market and the

⁷http://ec.europa.eu/eqf/about_en.htm

acquisition of key competences which are indispensable for social and labour inclusion [10] and responding by stimulating and encouraging WBL among workforce.

4. BENEFITS AND SUGGESTED ACTIONS FOR COOPERATION

4.1. Benefits

Although the decade since the introduction of the Bologna Process⁸ has brought about a major expansion in higher education systems, accompanied by significant reforms in degree structures and quality assurance systems, the recent and present financial and economic crisis has affected higher education in different ways, with some countries investing more and others making radical cutbacks in spending for training and workforce development.

The now common European wide challenge is to recover from the crisis. The upturn is limited by the difficulties encountered when recruiting people with the right skills for the jobs that are being created. Serious deficits of job-specific skills in qualified management and technical professionals are hampering Europe's sustainable growth objectives, e.g. in science, technology, engineering and mathematics [11].

Supporting the recovery process is the *Europe 2020 Strategy* that seeks to tackle the employment and skills challenges by helping (i) unemployed young people to get back to work, especially those not in education, employment or training (NEET) and of interest in our case, (ii) encouraging older workers to stay longer in the labour market and limit the risk of long-term unemployment by supporting to acquire and develop the skills they need to seize new job opportunities. It also is needed to enhance people's transferable skills — oral and written communication, literacy, numeracy and the use of Information and communications technology (ICT) — skills that are strongly valued in the labour market [7] as also reported by employers through our online survey [8].

To reach the Europe 2020 objectives EU members are required to invest for a more highly skilled workforce that adapts to rapidly changing skill needs and persistent skill mismatches (between the skills we have and the skills we need). Skills development is essential for raising productivity, competitiveness, growth, and employment. Work-based learning is strongly in line with EU2020 and matches its purposes.

Improving people's skills is a real 'win, win' for all – for the economy, for society, for employers and, of course, for individuals themselves (Table 1). Improved skill levels help to 'get in' (to work in the first place, from education or from unemployment), 'stay in' (keep in work after entering the labour market) and 'get on' (progress through the labour market into better jobs) [11].

Table 1. Interlinked benefits of Skills Development.

<p>INDIVIDUALS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * Improved job entry and job sustainability, ability to move between jobs, higher rate of successful start-ups * Increased wage return * High job quality and satisfaction 	<p>SOCIETY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Health improvements *Increased participation *Greater social cohesion and mobility
<p>ECONOMY</p>	<p>EMPLOYERS</p>

⁸ The Bologna Process is a series of ministerial meetings and agreements, signed in 1999, between European countries designed to ensure comparability in the standards and quality of higher education qualifications.



* Increased productivity and competitiveness	* Enhanced productivity
* Increased employment and entrepreneurship	* Better business performance
* Reduced economic inactivity	* Greater profitability

Thus, the early identification of skills required in the labour market is an important trigger for the planning and regulation of education and training supply. Skills forecasts are often used to define specific quantitative targets for education and training provision. It needs to be considered that the so called ‘declining’, relatively low skilled occupational workers, the trend is towards increasing skill requirements mainly due to customer demands and expectations increase, technology changes and work organization becomes more complex. Up-skilling the workforce and matching availability of skills with labour market needs is a key challenge for employment policy all over Europe [11].

All obstacles identified by our research point out that it is quite difficult to develop one universal set of recommendations supporting the introduction of WBL. Therefore we suggest the development of recommendations and valuable argumentssupporting WBL that should be flexible enough in terms of possibility to tailor these to a specific business sector within a given regional context rather than considering country-wide systems. As a result, specific recommendations that might meet the main research question of this paper, about what actions employers might undertake to foster the cooperation with HEIs (in order to be competitive on the market, re-skilling their workforce rather than up-skilling), especially in those EU contexts in which there is still a lack of legislation and recognition of Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) leading to formal qualifications, action recommendations should be based on enabling factors existent in the country.

In first place it is important to clarify the benefits of WBL for employers, covering a strategic and a tactical organizational based level. Evidence from our project’s Case Studies suggest that at the

strategic level there is considerable evidence that ‘investment in people’ (e.g. workforce development) has a long term payback through an educated and high performance workforce. As a outcome, employers that do not invest in and develop their workforce tend not to sustain high performance. Long term education, considering a more holistic personal development, is more effective than short-term training. At this level education imparts not only skills but qualifications, which can produce a more satisfied and fulfilled workforce. Paradoxically, education through employer collaboration with an HEI need not be more expensive (and can often be cheaper) than ‘short course’ training offered by consultants and commercial trainers (internally delivered training). Long-term contacts between an employer and a HEI can provide a fruitful alignment between the needs of the employer and the provision of negotiated programmes of study – the tripartite negotiation between employer, HEI and learners that is central to effective WBL.

Through negotiation the curriculum can be aligned with the Human Resources strategy of the employer and the learning can therefore be contextualized and focused clearly and accurately on business needs (when compared to ‘one for all’ training programmes). Finally, the main strategic advantage of effective WBL may be seen in the development of a knowledge-intensive ‘learning’ organization that shows interest in spreading best practice and knowledge sharing.

At the tactical or ‘middle’ organisational level the advantages of WBL are equally apparent as the assessment is not separated from the execution of the work and the negotiation both individualises the learning programme and allows middle managers to participate in directing the development of their staff to a common end, tying the WBL into the needs of their part of the business. This participation in a team development experience can help to motivate and retain a high performing workforce. It should be noted that



WBL programmes should complement and work alongside existing management systems at this level, such as staff appraisals, personal development plans etc.). One effect of WBL negotiation at this level (i.e. between line managers and employees/learners) is that the opportunity arises to act as a mentor in the learning process – making the talents and potential of the learner more visible to the manager outside the immediate work situation. This two-way conversation makes the line management relationship and process more open and transparent. The development of ‘soft skills’ (e.g. team working skills, problem solving skills, communication and negotiation) can be a result of this process.

Not only is the benefit for the company itself worthy of consideration but also definitely that for the HEI [3], but WBL is also of advantage for the employee/learner when successfully implemented, by considering the up-skilling of the workforce as part of an integrated learning pathway working towards personal and organisational objectives. It is a way of reviewing and learning from experience and requires the acquisition of the meta-competence, the *learning to learn* [2].

So that WBL programmes could result of a **qualitative impact**: it improves workforce’s quality of work, motivation (to achieve goals) and commitment while increasing its ability to innovate and develop new products and processes supporting the use of innovation through new methods and technologies; learners possibly exercise decision-making at the point of customer contact and act independently in performing their role in customer service. From the private learners’ point of view it is also motivating that WBL programmes are flexible and can be part-time, therefore fitting to people’s individual needs. The **quantitative impact** can be determined by a reduction in staff turnover and increased production volume. WBL employers can monitor and measure ‘skills gaps’ thereby closing them before they lose workers and/or profit and causing minimal time disruption to the company as little time is taken off for training purposes of the job and the possible potential to accredit company training programmes [3].

4.1. Suggested actions for cooperation

Employers that would like to benefit in terms of cost-effectiveness from WBL for the company-based growth and development and that are seeking for employer-driven qualifications served by HEIs, should therefore follow a procedure of research and analysis in order to create a climate of confidence and thus to establish and foster profitable cooperation with Universities.

In order to start establishing the conditions for WBL programmes for EU businesses, especially in territorial contexts that are less encouraged by their present legislative and administrative conditions, it

follows a list of actions that employers could carry out to start up the process of cooperation with HEIs, suggesting first:

- To carry out market research and development plan through customer needs. A business that understands its customers and their buying habits can sell more effectively, compete with other suppliers, target new customers and identify new opportunities. One way to achieve this is through market research, which assists in discovering what people want, need, or believe.⁹ It can also involve discovering how they act. Once that research is complete you can use it to determine how to market your specific product. Market research is a key factor in gaining advantage over competitors. Market research provides important information to identify and analyse the market need, market size and competition. Market research includes social and opinion research, (and) is the systematic gathering and interpretation of information about individuals or organisation organisations using statistical and analytical methods and techniques of the applied social sciences to gain insight or support decision making [12].

⁹ N.B. market research and marketing research are two different terms.



- To draft a company strategy and operational plan to continually improve employee performance. This could include skills gap analysis, training needs analysis, appraisals, personal development plans, mentoring and succession planning.
- To investigate and find out how to finance the re-skilling training needed for employees, how to access Government and/or EU funding to support educational programmes.
- To analyze and categorize skills difficult to obtain from the employees. To identify these skills and measure the feasibility, thus timing and costs disposed to invest and to consider the importance that the training provided leads to a formal qualification.
- To give the workforce opportunities to identify their personal learning needs and performance improvement.
- To set up a “culture of growing own talent” for employees and the company itself.
- To organize or participate in discussion lists, roundtables or online chats that focus on a given industry in the regional area, so to get in contact with other employers and/or entrepreneurs that might be looking for similar skills and competence for their workforce.
- To do not be reluctant to train the workforce for fear of them leaving due to their progress and their possible recognition of qualification, or rather regarding expense as the main barrier to engaging with WBL.

After having clearly identified the workforce’s learning needs and the ‘business surrounding’, we suggest:

- To contact HEIs present on the territory and consult to evaluate which possible cooperation methods there might be. In order to employers be informed about academic requirements, practices and languages as it relates to WBL [3].
- To have a look at existing curricula and compare the learning objective with the skills and competences needed for employees.
- Definition of individual employee development plans, selecting workers and arranging jobs to optimize the potential of employees.

To be aware of the upcoming changes at national and EU level concerning training models (like WBL), funding opportunity and educational policies.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The wider consequences of increasing labour market flexibility without securing job transitions through training and guidance, or without protecting workers’ wellbeing, could ruin social cohesion and damage the social contract between the citizens and the state; governments and social partners need to be vigilant. As mid-career changes become recurrent, public authorities, social partners, Vocational education and training (VET) providers and companies will need to explore new answers to the questions on when, how, where and by whom training provision will be delivered and financed, since flexible access to training will need to be combined with flexible work organization [10], which is actually what WBL represents and supports, flexibility.

Considering fact that we spend a third of our daytime, and more than thirty years of our lives, in successive working environments emphasises the significance of the workplace in making lifelong learning a reality, stimulating motivation and participation in learning and retention of adults in education and training, with particular attention to in-service workforce targets. We learn through work tasks, from colleagues and work



mentors, through trial and error, by solving challenges and changing job positions, as well as through the continuing training that employers may provide. Employers, HEIs, trade unions and public authorities have a major responsibility for creating the conditions in the workplace for workers to continue learning and broaden their competences.

Lifelong learning in the frame of employment and employability is nowadays, and 'traditionally', identified with Vocational education and training only, perceived as a crucially important educational model relevant for many professions. The Commission was and is supporting partnership among Member States and social partners with the aim to raise the attractiveness and availability of VET and to show ways of modernising VET systems [13].

The WBLQUAL project's literature review, research findings and existing best practices [5] suggest work-based learning as a valid and profitable alternative, or integration, to VET for its innovative character being centred around reflection on work practices, that views learning as arising from action and problem-solving within a working environment.

We aim to acknowledge about benefits of WBL programme opportunities and existing best practice examples of it, given that employers too often do not know how to successfully engage and take advantage of it, leading to the overwhelming conclusion that there is a confusing lack of connection, coordination and cooperation between the parties involved - employers, learners/employees and education providers (HEIs such as universities, academies, colleges, seminaries, and institutes of technology) -, that on the contrary should cooperate to challenge conventional educational thinking, and to design a new way of working with learners in the workforce.

This tri-partite relationship makes a powerful collaboration, where the Learner is ensured of a qualification that is career relevant and employment focused, the HEI can apply their expertise to ensuring academic rigor to their content and last but not least, the employer can ensure that the delivered collaborative curriculum is focused and relevant for the company development and maximises profit.

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8. DISCLAIMER

This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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