



STRATEGIC, TACTICAL AND OPERATIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACADEMIA INVOLVEMENT INTO WORK-BASED LEARNING – RESULTS FROM WBLQUAL, AN EU-FUNDED PROJECT

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Abstract

It is accepted that there is a cultural gap between the worlds of academia and industry. Universities can see themselves as set apart from the commercial pressures that industry is accustomed to, and they can consider that their interaction is best kept to the theoretical context and research. Universities usually offer traditional courses in terms of content and delivery, with little or no recognition of the tri-partite relationship between learner, employer and higher education institution (HEI). Employers have criticised academia for not adapting to their needs, and being inflexible in their approach. The aim of the Erasmus research project “WBLQUAL – An Approach to Qualification through Negotiated Work Based Learning for the EU” is to find a more effective way of labour force up-skilling through the use of academic work-based learning (WBL) programmes. This paper aims to examine how some elements of university culture (structures, resources, processes and procedures) influence HEI involvement in work-based learning practices. The method used included secondary study of legislation in 5 participating countries (Latvia, UK, Italy, Denmark, Poland) and literature review, as well as individual in-depth interviews (IDIs) targeting academia people at different management levels (strategic, management and operational). Our findings illustrate a complexity of WBL issues on the side of universities, which make it impossible to formulate universal messages across different management levels at academia, but instead call for making them customised to the various target groups. Recommendations concerning more involvement of academia into work-based learning that emerge from literature review and IDIs were formulated at the strategic, tactical and operational levels.

The presentation forms a part of the WBLQUAL ‘section’ of the conference.

Keywords: University-Industry collaboration, work-based learning, university policies and procedures

1 FOREWORD

The paper belongs to a series of publications regarding tripartite view on WBL. It is based on investigations reported in [1] and together with [2], [3], [4], [5], and [6] forms the conference’s section ‘WBLQUAL’ devoted to the results of the project “An Approach to Qualifications through Negotiated Work Based Learning for the EU - WBLQUAL” [7], 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 the tripartite view on WBL.

The main objective of the research presented in this paper is to examine how some elements of university culture (structures, resources, processes and procedures) influence HEI involvement in work-based learning practices.

2 METHODOLOGY

Research methodology combines both secondary and primary research studies. The secondary research took the form of a literature review related to WBL. The primary research was done within the framework of the WBLQUAL project [2] using the following research tools:

- a) *Country Specific Reports*, giving an overall picture of the higher education systems in the countries of analysis prepared in the UK, Italy, Denmark, Latvia and Poland;
- b) *Individual in-depth interviews*, conducted with a range of participants working at the partners' universities at different levels of HEI management: strategic (interviews with senior university managers including rectors, faculty deans, chancellors), tactical (faculty managers, quality directors, finance managers) and operational (academics, programme leaders, administration).

The distribution of the respondents of individual in-depth interviews was detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1 Respondents of individual in-depth interviews across the analysed countries

Country	Type of respondents
United Kingdom	Vice chancellor Head of Computing and Student Experience Business Innovation Support Coordinator Academics (3)
Denmark	Programme leader Academic
Latvia	Dean, Director of a study programme Head of the Department of Continuing Education Academic
Poland	Pro-Rector in Charge of Curricula and Teaching Dean Programme Leaders (2) Academics (2)

3 WORK-BASED LEARNING AS A CHALLENGE TO TRADITIONAL EDUCATION MODELS

Research suggests that the most effective, valuable and developmental learning for people in work is that which actively occurs through the medium of work itself, especially when the work is engaged with critically and reflectively [8] [9] [10] [11] [12]. Over recent years, higher education institutions have moved towards enhancing and accrediting work-based learning with programmes being developed between HEI and employer or other stakeholders. There is much to be gained from a closer collaboration between universities and industry, and especially the engagement of universities in work-based learning. These include the following:

1. Transfer of knowledge, innovation and expertise from academia to industry;
2. Transfer of knowledge, innovation and expertise from industry to academia;
3. Closer alignment of universities to economic drivers and the needs of the labour market,
4. Workforce development through academic programmes leading to improvements in productivity and performance to make more efficient and sustainable economic conditions;
5. WBL learners gaining qualifications that are robust and relevant to their needs;
6. Universities adapting to changing demographic profiles and economic conditions. WBLQUAL sought to facilitate further exploitation of these benefits.

Incorporating WBL effectively into HEI courses provides benefits for all those involved. For the HEI, there is potential for a lower assessment burden and shared responsibility on learner tutorship [13].

Learners benefit as they can use their existing knowledge as a basis for developing and acquiring new knowledge, developing higher-level learning and work-related skills simultaneously, and exploiting the workplace as a learning resource [14]. Employers benefit because WBL programmes can be tailored to employer needs with specific projects being directly related to the business context, the employer is closely involved in the delivery, and there is the potential to accredit company training programmes and prior experience that is relevant to the study. WBL programmes are also likely to have a positive impact on workforce performance and productivity, as they help reduce skills shortages and allow a company to grow their own workforce, increase employee motivation (which is likely to result in increased staff retention), and there is minimal disruption to the company as little time is taken off the job [15]. Brennan [16] suggests there are three main advantages for HEIs engaging with WBL:

1. Higher education is more likely to have continuing relevance if it responds to economic imperatives for the supply of appropriately skilled and knowledgeable workers and aims to better equip them for the changing nature of work. Of specific importance here are:
2. Changes in the organisation of work and changing employment patterns, particularly how higher education responds to the growth of graduate employment and the range of employment sectors to which this applies;
3. Changing skill requirements, as higher level skills such as problem solving, critical thinking, communication and teamwork, are particularly important here, and technical skills alone are not considered to be sufficient;
4. The rise of the 'knowledge economy' where learning is seen as an integral and on-going feature of working, as more workers are now expected to use generic and technical knowledge and skills to contribute to new knowledge production in the workplace;
5. Employers value the attributes and qualities that graduate employees can bring to the workforce;
6. WBL allows higher education to play to its strengths in assessing and accrediting learning outcomes and this has the potential to be an important source of additional income.

The key driver of HEI's change more towards WBL delivery is championing of WBL at the senior level, i.e. vice-chancellor, deputy or pro-vice-chancellor. This is critical for influencing the extent to which employer engagement or responsiveness is seen as a strategic priority. In order to bridge the gap between 'traditional' academic processes aimed at the undergraduate market and the different requirements needed to engage employers in WBL, innovative operating models are required which incorporate sales, marketing and business development, with products and services that deliver on propositions made to employers. These should include: offering integrated solutions rather than narrow products; and designing solutions with demonstrable business benefit. For most HEIs, successful employer engagement and employer relationships requires a high level of flexibility.

A factor limiting HEIs' ability to respond to employers' requirements in a timely way can be a lack of flexibility around delivery mode and timings as argued by Kewin, et al. [17]. They suggest that HEIs should streamline internal processes and reduce timescales required for course development. Delivery capacity was identified as a key factor inhibiting the ability of HEIs to respond in a timely manner. It is recommended that HEIs should build workforce planning activity into workload planning models and establish a network of individual associates and collaborative provider partnerships to ensure an adequate supply chain for delivery. In their research looking at the current state of play of WBL in HE, Nixon et al. [18] observe that HEIs have developed pedagogical approaches to WBL that highlight a strongly student-orientated and process-driven, rather than content-driven, curriculum. The learning outcomes stress the need to use practical experiences to enhance skills development, require learners to apply theories and constructs in a workplace setting, and to broaden their underlying knowledge and understanding. Such outcomes are agreed in collaboration between learner, employer and HEI, and

form the basis of a 'learning contract'. Solomon and Gustavs [19] emphasise that learning outcomes for a WBL programme operate at a number of different but interrelated levels: knowledge, understanding, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation and abstraction. Learning outcomes are typically focused on a student being able to and/or knowing how to operate at these levels. A mainstay of a WBL curriculum in a

specific context is that it is derived from the application of learning in the workplace and a learner's current knowledge and experience. The teaching must be experiential in nature and ensure that the workplace provides an opportunity for the practical application of taught content.

4 THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF WORK-BASED LEARNING ANALYSIS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Given the complexity of WBL issues on the side of HEIs, the approach to analyse the work-based learning related issues across higher education institutions and then formulate usable messages (recommendations) cannot be universal, but instead customised to the expectations of and communicated to the various target groups at different levels of HEI management. With this in mind, a conceptual model was developed that distinguishes between three various levels of HEI management: strategic, tactical and operational (Table 2). Any higher education institution wishing to support work-based learning must align their institutional strategies, policies, resources, structures, systems and processes accordingly.

The approaches toward work-based learning must in addition give consideration to cross-cutting issues of costs, impact and benefits.

Table 2. Levels of HEI management whose specific expectations should be addressed

Level	Activity	Targets
Strategic	"Thinking right"	Rector, Chancellor, Dean
Tactical	Optimizing resources	Finance Director, Quality Director, Faculty Managers
Operational	"Doing the right things"	Programme Leaders, Academics, Administration

Source: own concept derived from discussions with the project partners

5 PERSPECTIVES OF WBL INTRODUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT – MAIN FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH

Research carried out in the countries of analysis revealed that the countries are very much diverse with respect to WBL thinking. Only in the UK WBL is in use [1] whereas in all other countries the idea is not even known. For instance, the Internet investigation of what has been discussed in WBL context in Poland gave no hits for the Google search.

Individual in-depth interviews and literature search carried out within the WBL project shed some light on the potential of WBL introduction in educational practices (in case of Denmark, Latvia, Poland and Italy) and WBL further development (in case of the UK) through the prism of its main enablers and barriers.

One of the most important drivers of WBL engagement seems to be the extent of the state's subsidies for the higher education systems [3]. Except for the UK such subsidies constitute the major foundation of the universities well-being and discourage HEIs from looking for some alternative sources of revenues which WBL can provide. As reflected in the interviewees' opinions WBL is an area that can potentially grow and this can have a decisive importance on HEIs considering whether WBL is worth of engagement or not.

Among the enablers of WBL introduction and development one should also highlight a widely shared acceptance of the benefits that linking education, skills and labour force development can bring to

economy and that the tripartite approach (HEI, employer, learner) is relevant and viable for addressing employers' strategic objectives and staff development developed through WBL [6].

Besides the enablers there are also some barriers to its implementation and development. One of the barriers that can be posed to actual involvement in WBL practices can be the national accreditation legal framework. Adult learners' interest to engage in WBL education is very much dependent on accreditation of prior (experiential) learning (APEL) being in place. The investigation revealed that in only in the UK were APEL solutions were in use (in Denmark these are close to being introduced in a similar form).

Other most important considerations referred to university structures. The general perception was that departments try to fit WBL into a system which is geared towards traditional, full-time students whereas WBL



programmes do not necessarily follow the structure of the university academic year. Another issue raised was that universities use enrolment procedures, award boards etc. which do not always fit in with the timescales that employers want.

6 KEY MESSAGES FOR WORK-BASED LEARNING IMPLEMENTATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

Based on the research output the key considerations about improving engagement of academia into work-based learning were formulated. They mainly reflect the situation of the countries with established work-based practices and thus are grounded mainly on UK research findings.

They do not go beyond the tripartite relationship academia – employers – learners and as such they do not take account, for instance, of policy regulations (e.g. cuts in subsidies) remaining beyond control of WBL stakeholders in this relationship.

6.1 Strategic level

There are a number of issues of a strategic nature which determine a successful implementation of WBL inside the higher education institution. These include strategic commitment towards WBL, customer (employer and learner) focus, building sustainable partnerships with employers and effective APEL in place.

6.1.1 Strategic institutional commitment towards WBL

Work-based learning needs to be clearly identified as the institution's strategic priority for development. Embeddedness in the institution's strategic plan will allow to communicate it externally to the public and internally down to lower institution's structures, i.e. faculties, schools, departments guiding its customization at lower levels of HEI management structure.

Such institutional commitment articulated in the HEI's strategic documents will make a visible link with other institution's strategies. As a strategic priority it will be reflected in the institution's action plans, performance measures, review and improvement schemes.

6.1.2 Customer focus

Unlike what is often typical for traditional HEI thinking being centred around educational programmes developed with no relevance to actual employers and learners needs, HEIs wishing to engage in WBL need to adopt a business (commercial) approach to the possibly broadest extent. Customer focused approach shall include recognizing needs of the demand side of the educational market upon which adequate educational offer maximizing employers and learners satisfaction can be drawn and realistic forecasts of take-up can be based. Therefore WBL programmes should align with key employer motivators and strategic goals such as workforce skills development and skills utilization and employer appraisal systems, on one side, and with employee personal needs guided by their career progression paths on the other side [3]. Customer orientation with clearly identified channels of mutual

communication (including employers and learners feedback) and developed appropriate working mechanisms will allow to build sustainable relationships with employers.

6.1.3 Dialogue with employers

As WBL is based on a tripartite agreement between the institution, the learner and the employer, motivations of all its parties need to be recognized to create a 'win-win' situation for all and push HEI's strategic managers to WBL thinking [6]. Employer engagement in all stages of WBL process including programme design, delivery and assessment is crucial to its success.



6.1.4 *Effective APEL in place*

Assessment of prior (especially experiential) learning can be seen as an essential foundation for successful WBL implementation. The gap between what may be accredited towards a degree and the learning required to bridge that gap has to be clearly identified.

In order to ensure its effectiveness the APEL (accreditation of prior experiential learning) process and related procedures need to be embedded in the HEI's assessment policy and processes. Needless to say, the process should be recognised and understood by all staff and learners. HESl should provide the learners with the necessary skills of reflection and critical thinking of how to align a learner's prior learning with relevant theories and concepts required by the degree award (with some help of the contact person at the HEI) as well as with handful tools to collate evidence for APEL (e.g. an e-portfolio).

6.2 **Tactical level**

Tactical-level issues that determine a WBL success from the HEI perspective describe possible structures, processes and procedures that allow for optimization of HEI resources used for WBL development. In particular these include monitoring of actions and activities carried out, staffing issues, use of organizational and physical resources and e-learning issues.

6.2.1 *Optimisation-driven monitoring of WBL activities*

In order to ensure effective and efficient WBL delivery, WBL activities need to be monitored and evaluated in terms of impact, costs and benefits. This should enable economic (financial) and organizational (with respect to staffing, structures, processes and procedures) validation of the process and taking correction actions if necessary.

6.2.2 *Curriculum design*

Curriculum design could be based on generic frameworks that will allow for its contextualising to the variety of employers and prompt flexible adjusting it to the employer and learner needs. This should ensure that curriculum design is cost-effective and fit-for-purpose and can be developed promptly.

Generic frameworks could be based on pre-validated core learning modules to develop work-related generic skills, pre-validated modules emphasising experiential learning and modules for developing job-related or work-specific skills. Learning agreements are often developed on an individually negotiated (with employer and learner) basis.

Flexibility and rapid development of curriculum design will require a flexible accreditation framework for design of WBL courses.

6.2.3 *Human resources/ staffing*

Staffing issue seems to be critical for the WBL success. Firstly, it will include the right processes and procedures for staffing WBL programmes. WBL delivery will require from WBL staff an appropriate mix of skills, knowledge and business experience to which the recruitment, selection and workload

allocation processes should give consideration. A real problem can be posed by limited predictability of the demand for WBL staff as compared to the mainstream education delivery where it normally fits to an annually/half-annually repeatable cycle. Secondly, it requires that staff are assessed and trained in the areas where their skills are missing or need to be updated so that in WBL delivery highest

quality teaching and learner support can be assured. In addition, WBL staff is confronted with a variety of issues which call for professional development and interdisciplinary approach. Thirdly, appropriate reward mechanisms are in place to benefit adequately staff involvement in WBL practices.

In case of missing staff capacities in house, proper consideration should be given to recruiting specialist educators who have had mentoring or coaching experience and /or roles within workplaces in addition to wide educational experience. The ability to listen carefully and understand the complexity of the learner's



contexts is here critical. The skills of supervision, mentoring and coaching are crucial for WBL academic advisors and facilitators in supporting and guiding the learner to frame their experience and knowledge in such a way as to both meet the academic standards and empower the learner to fully engage with new learning.

6.2.4 Organizational and physical resources

HEIs need to check what organizational resources should be provided to support learning through this mode of higher education delivery. Of utmost importance for WBL right design, delivery and assessment seem to be organisational structures and mechanisms that resource, support and co-ordinate the WBL strategy and activities across faculties, schools and departments. Taking into account the interdisciplinary nature of WBL establishing a central unit to coordinate WBL activities throughout the institution seems to be the most appropriate for development and implementation of effective practice in WBL design, delivery and assessment. Unlike establishing WBL structures at faculties, schools or departments, this should prevent from avoidance of duplication of effort in WBL services and ensure consistency of approach in relation to the standard of WBL services, modes of their provision and assessment (unanimous business model) and costing policy.

6.2.5 ICT issues

Since e-learning tools contribute to cost-effective and efficient learning, communication, knowledge-sharing and assessment they need to be integrated into the curriculum design, delivery and assessment process. Appropriate ICT tools should support registration, enrolment and payment. They should also support budgeting and costing procedures as well as costs-benefits analyses. ICT tools should also serve as a platform for external (with all stakeholders) and internal marketing and communication (virtual learning environment enabling knowledge sharing practices).

6.3 Operational level

At the operational level actions must be taken to ensure 'doing the right things'. In particular, it comprises right communication between stakeholders, use of adequate processes and procedures, quality assurance, impact and cost-benefit measurement and issues of work-based learning outcomes.

6.3.1 Right communication between stakeholders

Since the worlds of academia and industry differ very much, there often arises a problem of clear communication. WBL design calls for true engagement of employers in the process, so that at the end of the day there is no place for misunderstanding of the learning agreement made between the three parties involved. This requires careful 'translation' of languages (jargons) used by each party and this can be only made in close interaction at early phases of WBL programme design.

6.3.2 Responsiveness to employer

With WBL implementation HEIs enter the new domain which requires their re-orientation towards a more business-oriented way of thinking and acting. A real challenge to HEIs can be a close interaction with employers in a 'partnership dialogue' on programme design, delivery and assessment. HEIs need to work out a suitable method of responding to employer/employee needs in an appropriate and a timely manner which will build their reputation as a reliable partner [6]. In order to achieve that they need to establish a WBL contact point within the institution which will be dedicated to run the 'dialogue'

with current and potential employers opting for this method of professional development of their employees.

6.3.3 Use of adequate processes and procedures

Right processes and procedures for costing, recruiting staff and going through the negotiation process first and then for efficient delivery and assessing and accrediting learning need to be incorporated in the HEI's



WBL practices to enable the university to respond to employer's expectations. The development of individualised awards should be made possibly fast-tracked for approval while maintaining the essential academic rigour of validation and accreditation processes.

6.3.4 *Quality assurance*

HEI needs to develop and incorporate mechanisms to profile tutors and select those who have the relevant competencies at the appropriate level and are able to meet specific WBL methods and contexts and to ensure comparability of standards. As mentioned earlier, HEIs need to ensure that employers fully understand the language and implications of academic quality and standards. This is extremely important from the employers' satisfaction point of view. There must be also some contingency situations carefully predicted well in advance (e.g. dissatisfaction from the mentoring services received, employer going bankrupt etc.) so that appropriate counteraction can be undertaken.

Another issue for consideration is appropriate procedures to feedback quality issues to employers involved in WBL courses in right and timely manner. Assessments incorporate appropriate feedback and allow learner and employer dialogue on the feedback. Lastly, assessments are relevant to learning outcomes (both competence and capability-based). Processes incorporated need to align with professional standards, qualifications frameworks and employers own standards.

6.3.5 *Impact and cost-benefit measurement*

Continuous improvement calls for measurement of the impact on learners and employers and carrying out cost-benefit analyses of programmes in the form of programme evaluation and regular reviews made with staff involved, employers and learners. WBL programme improvement needs to be embedded in the institution's normal assessment procedures.

6.3.6 *Work-based learning outcomes*

Curriculum design, delivery and assessment guidelines negotiated with the employer need to clearly articulate learning outcomes (linked to professional standards, sectoral skills or competencies acquired), activities through which they are achieved and how they relate to the context of work or the workplace. This should enable cross-curriculum mobility along different modules, different types of study (e.g. enabling shift from vocationally oriented study to study for mixed vocational/academic work-based degrees) and cross-industry mobility (if employees change the workplace, but would like to continue WBL education) 'bridging' programmes within and beyond one higher education institution. Again, the language through which all three parties of the WBL triangle communicate should not be misleading.

7 CONCLUSIONS

Although there is much to be gained from implementing and developing WBL in current educational practices for all the sides of the tripartite relationship, there is still a long way ahead as evidenced by the study results. As it seems this natural drive towards more interaction between HEIs and employers with careful consideration given to employers' skills having true value on the labour market cannot be escaped. HEIs seem to be those elements of the relationship that will be faced with the biggest challenge. In order to cope with the challenge they need to change towards greater flexibility allowing for true responsiveness to the labour market needs and aspirations. HEIs need to become more mature in that respect, however this requires a variety of changes introduced in the university culture.

The issues in developing and implementing successful WBL programmes, wherever this is attempted, need to be addressed at the strategic, tactical as well as the operational levels of both the employer organization and the HEI. The long-term relationship between these organizations should be regarded as a strategic matter (a form of customer relationship management) as support at the highest level is of vital importance in enabling the vision of and support for WBL to be promulgated at a sufficiently high level in both organizations. Negotiations between the 'strategic partners' in this relationship therefore should include the strategic planners and most senior staff of the HEI and the employer. At the tactical level 'buy in' from middle management in both organizations is important in terms of the allocation of resources, the development and



availability of academic staff who are suitably skilled and experienced in WBL. In addition, much of the detailed negotiation about the WBL programmes, modules and their delivery will take place at this level. At the operational level, the staff administering and delivering WBL programmes must be committed to this mode of work. The methods of delivery and the engagement with learners in the workplace with work as the curriculum are very different from conventional academic programmes. This must be reflected in the design, delivery and future development of WBL initiatives.

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DISCLAIMER

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