Integrating employers in effective support for student work-based learning (WBL): an evidence base to inform innovative policy and practice

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1. Introduction

Work-based learning (WBL) provides a powerful learning environment for higher order 'enquiry' skills and capabilities demanded by the UK economy in an increasingly competitive, globalised environment (Leitch Report, 2007). Research highlights the importance of WBL in supporting capacity building for self-sustaining life-long learning, in developing effective active learning environments and in facilitating sustainable co-learning communities beyond the University. Moreland (2004), for example, proposes that 'higher education programmes must progressively confront students with complex, in-the-world activities that encourage reflection and risk assessment' (Little et al., 2006, p3). WBL is, however, a complex, contested generic term (HE Academy, 2006; HEFCE, 2006; Brennan and Little, 2006; QAA, 2007). What is uncontested is the emphasis that the Leitch Report (2007, p21) places on the necessity for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to work with employers to deliver a 'step change in liaison'.

At the level of the student experience, effective WBL requires 'suitable' conditions, with effective partnerships between learners, employers and HEIs as the keystone (Boud and Solomon, 2001). Beaty (2007) outlines the expansion of HE embedded in workforce development and the importance of getting employers as well as learners engaged with HE. Important research has explored student employability through the curriculum and educational development (e.g. ESECT Reports e.g. Yorke, 2006). However, little has been undertaken to identify best institutional practice in communication between HEIs and employers to ensure 'employer support' for the student learning experience – at different levels and in different disciplinary contexts and employer settings.

Communication and language problems experienced by different tribes within academic institutions (Becher, 1989) may be magnified between HEIs and employers in seeking to develop mutually beneficial partnerships. Members of different constituencies:

> 'can share the discourse of their communities, each coming to recognise the ambiguities of their own taken for granted assumptions, values and understandings, thereby creating a new common language of the curriculum as well as a sense of shared purpose' (Fraser, 2006, p6).

The employer role in supporting student learning extends through student preparation/ recruitment to the WBL activity, embracing varied models including facilitator, mentor and assessor. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the sector provides an ad hoc range of support/ guidance (in terms of quality and scope) for employers in different WBL settings. This, together with varying levels of employer resources and enthusiasm for engaging explicitly with 'student learning', mitigates against a consistently high-quality student WBL experience. Extent of employer engagement in WBL may depend on various factors including organisational size, rural/urban setting, workforce diversity, approach to student involvement in the workplace, the character/ culture of disciplines and employment sectors involved. While a large literature addresses employer's requirements of graduates (see

ESECT); little focuses on how employers can most effectively contribute to the creation of effective active, reflective WBL environments.

2. The project

This HE Academy funded project has focused on evaluating the employer support required for effective active, reflective student WBL learning and in developing stakeholder guidance for employers, students and staff/HEIs. Here WBL is broadly construed as student learning activity involving 'workplace' links, including where:

- HEI places students in the workplace for project work that is integrated with institution-based delivery;
- student undertakes a period of work with an employer, at an appropriate level and with briefing and support from their HEI;
- HEI arranges with the student's current employer for ways to build WBL practices into the workplace.

By focusing on employer support for WBL, the project aims:

- to maximise the value of students' WBL experiences by optimising opportunities for engaging in active reflective learning;
- to develop a shared language between employers and HEIs in the support of WBL students; and
- to engage with employers to support their facilitation of appropriate WBL environments, trialling digital story telling as an 'employer development' resource.

3. Methodology

The research design integrated analysis of evidence nested at macro-, meso- and micro-scales.

Stage 1: The context-setting *Literature Review* synthesised a range of international research and policy literature (including conceptual/ theoretical backgrounds) on HEI support for the employers' role in contributing to successful, active WBL environments to identify models of effective practice.

Stage 2: The *Review of Institutional Practice* involved the identification of examples of HEI guidelines for employer support in different disciplines using the research team's strong networks (e.g. CETLs; HE Academy Subject Centres; International Consortium for Educational Development and ASSET).

Stage 3: A *Questionnaire survey* of UK HEIs requested information and examples of HEI guidelines for employer support in different WBL settings and different discipline areas. Circulation was by letter to the Pro-Vice Chancellors of 139 HEIs. Fifty-four completed questionnaires (39% response rate) were analysed to identify effective practice.

Stage 4: Six focus groups (6-8 participants; 70 minutes duration) were undertaken at two contrasting case-study institutions (one rurally-located 'new' University – University of Gloucestershire; one city-located 'old' University – Aston University) to identify different perspectives on support needs to enable employers to most effectively support students in WBL. These comprised:

- students (at different levels and in different discipline areas) currently or recently engaged in WBL;

- regional employers for both Universities from different sectors, scales of enterprise, urban/rural settings and diversity of workforce who take students for WBL; and

- staff with responsibility for facilitating WBL in different discipline areas (.g. placement managers).

Stage 5. A one-day *National Expert Seminar* (University of Gloucestershire, May 2008), comprising 30 representatives from HEIs/ employers was used to explore critically the transferability of themes drawn from the focus groups. These seminar outcomes are contributing to Stage 6.

Stage 6 Digital stories are being trialled as tools to capture stakeholders' critical reflections on their WBL experiences, articulations of their role and employer support requirements in the promotion of reflective active WBL environments. This work draws on digital story telling expertise at the University of Gloucestershire (Centre for Active Learning, Jenkins and Lynch, 2006; HE Academy/ JISC funded Pathfinder project on Digital Storytelling, Gravestock, 2008).

4. Results

The *Literature review* (Stage 1) found numerous studies on WBL and employer engagement from strategic perspectives, far less on practical levels of WBL preparation/ delivery and nothing on effective HEI support for employers. The need to develop a strong relationship between employers/HEIs was identified as a key theme.

- The role of employers in *course development* is frequently mentioned, how to increase employer understanding of how WBL sits in broader student learning and their meaningful involvement in course design.

- Stakeholder perspectives on '*value*' differ. The employer perspective is commercial, seeking 'value for money' and a positive impact on their organisation's performance through WBL involvement.

- Several *barriers* were faced by HEIs in being responsive to employers' needs including: cost/finance; complexity of University systems; lack of common language/understanding; lack of HEIs' responsiveness and flexibility.

- *Key challenges* involved mutual understanding of employer/HEI needs and developing the relationship.

The *Review of Institutional Practice* (Stage 2) appraised practical guidance in relation to employer support and what is available through various relevant organisations. Most examples related to 'work placement' as a dominant WBL model.

In the institutional questionnaire (Stage 3), 55% HEIs that responded considered that they were 'well developed' in terms of their engagement with WBL. A diverse range of WBL activities were reported across a wide range of discipline areas. 41% generic

policies for WBL were at institutional level while 39% were discipline-based. 80% respondents considered that they provided support for employers engaged in WBL. Employer support is provided in almost all the disciplines (e.g. Business, Engineering, Education, Computing, Astronomy, Law, Health and Social Care Sciences, Veterinary, Chemistry, Professional Health Sciences, Psychology, Geography and Environmental Studies, Fashion, Music and Biomedical Sciences) and took a variety of forms (Table 1).

Table 1: Different forms of employer support

Theme	Type of employer support
Communication:	Advisory boards; Placement Offices; Accreditation; Link Tutors; visiting tutors
Training Support:	mentor training; formal training; workshops
Information & Guidelines:	briefing sessions; employer handbooks; placement guidance; information packages.
Course Related:	design of learning opportunities; work experience based learning programmes; quality procedures; subsidised CPD; access to course leader discussions; 2nd marking assignments; distance learning materials
Administrative support:	Some administrative tasks undertaken by HEI; placements for disabled students

Focus groups (Stage 4) aimed to identify different perspectives on effective practice in terms of employer support for student learning (see Table 2 for a summary of the key themes across different groups).

Table 2. Key themes from the different focus groups

Student focus groups	Staff focus groups	Employer focus groups
• Enhancement of students' learning experiences • Engagement • Value	• Engagement • Value • Commitment	• Responsiveness • University support for students • Employer engagement • Course Design • Placement planning • Communication and information • Value for money

Student focus group

Three key themes were identified as relevant to employer support. Students perceived that WBL significantly *enhances* their learning experiences, but this could be impeded by poor communication between University and employers and a lack of integration of their course-based and WBL. They considered that three-way communications (between employer, students and University) were required and identified opportunities for greater employer *engagement*. For example, this might involve employer involvement in course design to improve the links between course content and knowledge/skills required in the workplace and the provision of more course information (e.g. learning outcomes, including those of WBL) by Universities to employers. Whilst the *value* for the students was vested in the qualifications achieved, they perceived that the employers were seeking cost-savings from engaging in WBL.

Staff focus group

The themes of *engagement* and *value* were also reflected in the perceptions of staff. They considered that students benefited most where they were supported by employers committed to WBL. Such *commitment* was evidenced, for example, by the preparation undertaken by employers to ensure pre-knowledge of students, their courses and requirements; induction which was sympathetic to student needs and by providing students with networking and employment opportunities. Universities could assist this by provision of information and support to employers.

They perceived that employers gained value from committed, engaged students. Employers sought students with appropriate skills of value to their businesses now, and in the future as potential employees. Student engagement in project work of direct benefit to employers was also seen as valued. They perceived that direct employer involvement in programmes, such as in supporting reflection on and assessment of work placement, was also an important way to engage employers. Several specific examples of support for employers were identified. The development of student employability and skills specific to the work place was particularly mentioned in preparing students for undertaking work placements. It was also suggested that HEIs provide opportunities for employers to network and engage with other WBL providers and Universities. Such forums might offer opportunities to provide up-dating or training of relevance to WBL employers (e.g. in mentoring or reflective practice).

Employer focus group

In addition to *engagement* and *value*, the themes of *student support, responsiveness, course design, placement planning, communication* and *information* also emerged in relation to support for employers. WBL needs to be a partnership, of *value* to all parties. Engaging in WBL is a commercial decision for employers and HEIs need to support employers by ensuring that they benefit from student placements. Greater employer *engagement* could be encouraged through University provision of mentor training for employers, to enable them to take more WBL responsibilities, such as student supervision. Employers could be more involved in WBL preparation through presentations, workshops and input to specific programs and other course opportunities for employers to 'get in front of students'.

Employers perceived University responsibilities for *student support* in WBL to lie in 'tutor visiting', ensuring students are well equipped and in assessing their achievements. In return, employers considered that they could help students reflect – 'to understand, articulate and demonstrate what students develop from their WBL experience'. This could include helping students develop a PDP and identify skill gaps. Furthermore, Universities must be *responsive* and have 'somebody there' to address and quickly resolve employers' problems or issues.

Employers sought greater input to *course design* to improve the links between the WBL and the student's study, emphasising the importance of developing learning modes and design work placement structures to help support students' learning and reflection. There needs to be shared awareness of student goals in personal development (knowledge, skills) during WBL. *Placement planning* could be improved by HEIs getting to knowing the industries and companies involved and providing employers with information on students' strengths, weaknesses, interests and career development aims to help in managing student expectations of WBL.

Employers considered that effective *communication* with the HEI about all aspects of the WBL was important, to help promote mutual understanding of stakeholder needs. They need a variety of *information* about course objectives and what Universities and students are expecting to achieve through WBL. Examples were information on modules most relevant to students' placement experiences, clearly articulated learning outcomes and information about best practice in employer support for students.

5. Research as a platform for using digital story telling as tool

The project is trialling the use of digital stories as a medium for conveying critical reflection on issues raised. Digital story telling can be used in various ways in reflective learning (see Gravestock, 2008). Here a 'story' is quite simply an interpretation of, or critical reflection on, what happens in a given situation. The definition of a 'typical' digital story is a narrative of c. 250-300 words (2-3 minutes length) with still images used as enhancement. 'The simplicity of the process, and the fact that the technology required is fairly basic and easy to use, means that the focus is on the story rather than the technology' (Gravestock, 2008, p1).

The four key themes from the focus groups (engagement; expectations, value and critical reflection) will be represented from different stakeholder perspectives (different voices in effect) through the digital stories. One of the 'stories' will communicate stakeholder perceptions about the value of developing and encouraging critical reflection during WBL and how employers can help support this. The digital 'stories are simply a different and innovative medium through which to communicate the similarities and differences in stakeholder perception and inform support needs for effective WBL. There will be opportunity for feedback/ reflections from those that access the digital stories as learning objects. The website resource will also provide a gateway to extant resources for employer.

5. Discussion and conclusions

- There is a gap in the research and practitioner literature on good practice in supporting employers in the creation of effective WBL environments.

- There is considerable consensus among stakeholders in the identification of issues and needs in support for employers in their role in facilitating effective WBL environments. Recurrent themes are effective engagement, managing expectations, exploring value and supporting critical reflection.

- The nature of support needs articulated by employers reflects the importance of relationships as on-going partnerships between employers and HEIs. There is not simply a need for effective information flow relating to the practicalities of WBL, but also the requirement for extended dialogue on several themes including an understanding of needs/ expectations, input to course design and the inter-relationships between university-based and WBL.

- Employers can also be 'supported' by the 'university supporting students' before and during placement in a variety of ways. In the spirit of partnership, employers once cognisant of the intended learning outcomes from WBL, can help the student in on-going reflection. The role of University staff and employer in supporting the WBL needs negotiation, clarification and sharing of good practice.

- The project's digital story resource will provide a powerful exemplification of the common themes drawn from the research. There is potential for further exploration of the role of digital story telling in communicating critical reflection on the WBL experience and how to use this resource most effectively to help develop the knowledge/ expertise of different stakeholders.

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