Higher Education Institutions and Work-Based Learning in the UK: Employer Engagement within a Tripartite Relationship

Abstract

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK are increasingly engaging in work-based learning. The tripartite relationship between the HEI, the employer and the employee is viewed to be of great significance in work-based learning, not only in the initial stages of procurement of a contract, but also in designing and delivering the programme to meet the employer and employee needs, and those of the HEI, to make the programmes successful. This paper is based on one theme related to a larger EU-funded project on work-based learning leading to qualifications. Based on in-depth interviews at a post-1992 university in the UK with a range of staff including executive, senior management, managerial, teaching and administrative staff, we focus on this theme, to analyse employer engagement from the perspective of the HEI. We recommend strategies to enhance the tripartite relationship for the benefit of those involved and to improve policy and practice in the field. These include a strategic approach to work-based learning and regarding it as an integral part of higher education activity rather than a supplementary pursuit.

Key words:

Higher Education; Work-based Learning; Tripartite Relationship; Employer Engagement; Employees as Learners

Introduction

Global literature on higher education emphasises the importance of university-industry collaboration (see for example, Hall & Thomas 2005; Frasquet et al. 2012; Pallai et al. 2012; Lehtimäki & Peltonen 2013), though much of it focuses on a relationship between higher education institutions (HEIs) and employers with regard to traditional undergraduate courses and employability. The need to up-skill the existing workforce has also been identified in the literature. For example, in the UK, the Leitch Review of Skills (2006) sets short-term and long-term goals for UK education; the Cogent Skills Review (Cogent SSC 2008) outlines future priorities that affect science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) industries; whilst the Government White Paper, *Skills for Growth* (BIS 2009) refers to the importance of increasing the number of formalised qualifications obtainable by employees within industry.

In 2008, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) established the Transforming Workforce Development Programme which was funded for the period 2008-2011. This programme was aimed at providing funding (£45 million over three years) to support delivery of higher education to entrants, to be co-funded by employers, and to support HEIs in transformational change in employer engagement, i.e., to make necessary infrastructure developments and strategic changes, establish more contacts with business and set up new activities aimed at employer and employee needs (£103 million over three years). This upskilling of employees necessitates stronger cooperation between employers and higher education (HE) establishments to produce work-based learning (WBL) to include knowledge and qualifications that will not only develop the aptitude and career of employees, but will benefit industry, and generate income for the HEI at the same time.

Work-based learning is hard to define. It denotes any learning and knowledge that is acquired in a workplace; focuses on issues related to it; may be formal, quasi-formal or informal; and may or may not culminate in qualifications. Chapman and Howkins (2003) refer to WBL as a learning process rather than a teaching process – it develops skills and attitudes towards lifelong learning and encourages employees/learners to take responsibility for their own learning. It is a way to integrate higher level university learning, self-knowledge and formal knowledge, and workplace learning, experience and expertise (Flanagan et al. 2000). McKee and Burton (2005) concentrate on the practical aspects of WBL and define it as being both part of an academically accredited programme of study and part of a structured workplace learning programme, as well as being an individual and/or collective responsibility within the workplace. As can be seen above, the literature refers to various aspects related to

WBL. For the purpose of this paper, we acknowledge that WBL is all of the above. Nevertheless, we focus exclusively on learning that takes place at the employers' premises, entails a negotiated framework (NF), (in which the curriculum and pedagogy are finalised in negotiation with the employer); involves a tripartite relationship between the higher education institution (HEI), the employer and the employee; and leads to qualifications. This kind of learning can be extremely advantageous for the development of human capital.

Becker's (1993) theory of human capital focuses on improved productivity and organisational benefits, and these are amongst the main objectives of WBL. He points to a positive correlation between time in education, and workforce productivity and earnings. He contends that a key source of capital lies in the employees, and unlocking this latent potential is beneficial to the employer and the employee. He believes that if employees are allowed to improve their productivity through training, the organisation can benefit by being more successful than its competitors, and consequently recovering the cost of training. The employee can be rewarded in the form of an increase in salary, and if the training is undertaken in collaboration with an HEI, can attain HE qualifications.

Thus, incorporating WBL effectively into university courses provides benefits for all those involved, and developing a tripartite relationship between the employer, employee and HEI can be worthwhile for all parties, leading to an increase in human capital. For the HEI, it generates income, there is potential for a lower assessment burden, and shared responsibility on learner tutorship (Lemanski et al. 2011). Learners benefit as they can use their existing knowledge as a basis for new knowledge, develop learning and work-related skills simultaneously, and exploit the workplace as a learning resource (FDF 2008). Employers benefit because WBL programmes can be tailored to employer needs with specific projects directly related to the business, the employer is closely involved in the delivery, and there is the potential to accredit company training programmes. WBL programmes are also likely to have a positive impact on workforce performance and productivity, as they enhance human capital; help reduce skills shortages; allow a company to grow their own workforce; and 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 (FDF 2009; Helyer 2010).

Methods

In our larger study, five EU countries were involved in the project: the UK, Denmark, Italy, Latvia and Poland. We concentrated on awards/programmes with NF that result in accredited learning that extends the workplace skills of employees, i.e., learning which leads to qualifications. WBL in this context also includes negotiated WBL programmes which involve substantive contribution by the learners. This allows learners to customise a programme to their individual needs and prior learning experiences, thus enabling them to more effectively meet their own development targets.

As part of our bigger EU funded project, this paper focuses on employer engagement in WBL at one HEI. It presents an analysis of research conducted at a post-1992 public University, i.e. a former polytechnic, in the UK (hereafter called the University), from the perspective of its staff. The University has been offering WBL for some years now. All six faculties in the University were involved in the current research. These were: Arts, Media and Design; Business; Computing, Engineering and Technology; Health; Law; and Sciences. The key research question that this paper aims to address is: What are the perspectives of University staff regarding employer engagement in work-based learning?

The principal method of data collection was face-to-face interviews with a range of participants working within the University, including executive, senior management, managerial, teaching and administrative staff. Some telephone interviews were also carried out with participants who were unavailable for face-to-face contact. Only those managerial, teaching and administrative staff were approached who were involved in WBL, whereas executive and senior management staff participants were not directly involved in WBL. Data were analysed by identifying pertinent themes within the data that were gathered from University staff. These are discussed in the following sections (For further details of the project, see Basit et al. 2012a and 2012b).

Working with employers

Following an analysis of HEFCE's Transforming Workforce Development programme, Kewin et al. (2011) note that as a direct consequence of the programme, HEIs now use a wider range of business development and marketing interventions to systematically generate new WBL contracts. HEIs involved in the programme have become more business-like in their

approach to employers, concentrate marketing at high growth sectors, and are being more targeted in their promotion. Meeting stakeholder needs has thus become a part of HE. To make the tripartite relationship between the employer, employee and HEI successful in this mode of HE, careful consideration needs to be given to the interests of all parties. Penn et al. (2005) identify a tripartite workplace learning relationship to indicate how the needs and interests of stakeholders in the process are influenced:

- Individual learners' needs are influenced by their life plan (personal and career aspirations, skills, knowledge);

- Employers' needs are influenced by their business plan (productivity, innovation, workforce development);

- Providers' (HEIs') needs are influenced by their corporate plan (marketing, recruitment, access, curriculum, research and innovation).

This tripartite workplace learning relationship forms the basis for a learning contract between the employer, employee and the HEI. Nixon et al. (2006) maintain that the nature of the relationship between individual students and their employer also has a strong influence on the type of WBL that is accessed or designed. The workplace and learners' current knowledge and experience are therefore distinctive features of WBL curriculum development. Within this, the academic's role is to facilitate learning and to support the learner in achieving a more self-directed approach to learning. Learning to learn, i.e. acquiring meta-competence, alongside developing new knowledge and technical skills, is a defining feature of WBL (Raelin 2000).

WBL programmes are viewed as central to the University's academic strategy because of its commitment to partnership with regional and local employers:

> A straightforward successful programme is one that meets the needs of employers; that is satisfying for the students; and one that they're able to manage within the constraints of their work and so to streamline their study with their work and make sure that their study is relevant to their work. And for the University, one that makes it possible for the students to meet the standard of other degree programmes and that we're able to work collaboratively with employers also, so

> that we can improve our programmes in response to what we learn from the collaboration (Executive-1).

Executive-2 contemplated the wider role of the University and argued that WBL should not be left to individual programme managers, but elevated to become part of overall University strategy towards WBL. This could be a major source of income generation, and could have spin-off benefits in working with employers and developing its reputation as a business-focused university.

Evidently, employer engagement is perceived as important for the University. The work with an employer, Organisation-A, by Faculty-2 was viewed as the kind of successful programme from which other faculties could learn and aspects of which could be transferred to other contexts. Other faculties had attempted to emulate the success of this programme on a much smaller scale as a pathway in a particular programme based on a similar tripartite relationship, though with less commitment from the faculty and the employer. These were mainly thought to be developed at an operational level, whereas Organisation-A's relationship with Faculty-2 was very much at a strategic level involving the HR and Talent Management departments within that organisation.

This kind of strategic relationship is managed judiciously within the University. Executive-2 observed that sometimes the strategic developments of a client account could reach a point where it was beyond the scope of one academic, so to nurture a meaningful and long term relationship with large corporates needed an account director. An example of this is Faculty-4's relationship with Organisation-B and Organisation-C, where there is a team just managing the relationship. However, she also pointed to the psychological and cultural aspects of this relationship, and stressed that it is the University who owns the relationship with the client, not an individual faculty or a programme manager, because that would be self-defeating, as perceived issues of ownership of programmes and income need to be overcome for a broader vision of WBL. Therefore, synergy between faculties was viewed as essential by Executive-2. Currently, the University has about 20 key accounts, and six development accounts, but it was thought by some University staff that there is not sufficient awareness of this, as it is just a little cluster of people who are involved in these programmes, to the detriment of other faculties who could also be involved in, and/or learn from these projects.

Working with employers was viewed as problematic in some ways. Lack of resources such as adequate staff was perceived by faculties as a major hindrance. Having the appropriate

staff expertise for a particular employer, and not having staff trained in the right skills and approaches for working with employers was seen as a challenge. Some staff are nervous of WBL because corporate work and WBL can be quite demanding. It was believed that staff culture is always going to be an issue as there are some staff who just do not want to be involved, and others do not have time as they are already working above their academic contracts. Further, some staff believe they are educators not trainers, thus differentiating between *education* and *training* and implying that they do not perceive WBL as *education*.

Initial contact

Nixon et al. (2006:5) consider WBL, from an employer's perspective, as workforce development, i.e., 'the upskilling and reskilling of an organisation's employees'. The initial contact with the employer is therefore crucial as it can mean the difference between a successful or unsuccessful deal. The first point of the University's engagement with employers could come from a number of routes: via a faculty; a relationship with an academic; response to a campaign; or response to information on the University website. The core employer engagement team at the University comprises six staff members in Department-A (a department which has a leading role within the University in engaging with external organisations) whose specialist focus is WBL. About 15 people within Department-A have been trained to follow a specific method to client account management, and bring in appropriate academics and placement managers to provide a solution.

Interviews with management, teaching and administrative staff also showed that the initial engagement process varied in that this could be made either directly to an academic member of staff or via a lead from Department-A. The WBL coordinator or project manager act as a focal point within the Faculty and engage with employers directly. The need for this dual approach was emphasised by faculties. It was felt that a truly centralised approach would not necessarily work because each faculty is very specific. A key factor is recognising which leads are going somewhere and it was thought centralised sales would be less able to pick up on this because they would not have the specialised subject knowledge, that the faculties have, to conduct a needs analysis. An example of this was provided by staff in Department-B in Faculty-4, who try to understand where the employer is coming from, before they meet, by doing background research which facilitates the process of building confidence in their ability to deliver the programme. Staff meet with potential clients to make the clients comfortable as well as seek information from them. Such practice clearly facilitates the provision of WBL programmes, as exemplified in some faculties.

The Dean of Faculty-1 maintained that the faculty has a longstanding history of WBL with 50% of all programmes based in the workplace. A lot of undergraduate work in health, social work and sport in the Faculty leads to qualifications required in the workplace. WBL is very successful in the faculty with 91% retention on average. Enquiries are handled by the faculty. There is potential for a central University contact, though it may be perceived by faculties as very business focused, which many of Faculty-1 clients, such as the National Health Service (NHS), are not. Sometimes employers come to the faculty asking for something specific; at other times the faculty offers programmes to employers in response to changes in professional regulations, policy or press. Or it could be through responding to a need identified by employees already on a course. For both pre- and post-qualification programmes, the faculty has regular meetings with the NHS trusts and ad-hoc meetings if particular issues arise. This level of interaction requires substantial effort to run smoothly. Additional work is needed to ensure they keep in line with professional organisations' regulations and as a result of the continuing changes within the NHS. The post-qualifying department runs only awards and modules that commissioners want, so these are very much employer-led.

The Dean of Faculty-2 believed that engagement with the employers can be a two-way process. Normally, employers contact the University, and faculty staff talk them through the different kinds of WBL and collaborative arrangements that they have had with other employers, and use that as a way of trying to find out what the new contact would prefer. It was noted by the Dean of Faculty-3 that WBL programmes are not devised then recruited to, but the faculty liaises with employers, targeting a readymade market. The approach taken is demand-led and varies according to the needs of the employer. For example, Organisation-D came to the faculty with a course that they already had, but wished to make it much more professional and pitched at HE level.

Executive-1 felt that, in her current role, she was pivotal to the initiation and development of successful WBL programmes:

> I can act as an ambassador for the University working with various employers. I can be supportive and encouraging to staff to be creative in their thinking because the design of the programmes requires creativity in delivering programmes in different ways, or designing learning that's different from the traditional curriculum.

She believed that she could be an advocate for WBL, and could, with other senior staff, create networks for sharing good practice. Furthermore, as she was responsible for developing learning and teaching within the University, she could connect WBL staff with outside bodies that are focusing on similar areas to drive forward the development of these programmes.

Responding to employer needs

Knight and Yorke (2004) contend that many processes believed to be the features of effective HE are also conducive to employability, and there is substantial overlap between what employers value in new graduate recruits and what are considered to be the characteristics of good HE. Thus, theory and practice overlap. Also, employees who were unable to benefit from HE earlier in life might want to embark on it while in employment, not only to acquire additional work-related skills, but also to gain promotion. WBL, therefore, has a clear social justice outcome. While WBL's link to social justice is acknowledged in vocational education (Avis, 2004), there is little understanding of its potential to transform lives through HE.

The definition of WBL is perceived by University staff as broad; there is no standardised view of what it entails; and the term is not used consistently across the University; which can be an issue. The aim of WBL, nevertheless, appears to be to try and find out exactly what employers need. This involves a process of discussion which in Faculty-5 tends to require one or two people: someone who knows the field and does the liaison work, and who is able to discuss costings and what they might do in terms of provision. However, in some instances they may just have a subject specialist going in who would not discuss the things employers were uncomfortable with, e.g., costings.

Faculties respond to employer needs in a number of ways. For example, the training needs of staff in a ceramics company were identified by a representative from the ceramics industry in a meeting with the Dean of Faculty-3. The project manager then followed it up by meeting with the company, asking what type of training was needed, which was subsequently developed. A process of negotiation followed which involved working out what the company actually wanted and then doing some investigative work in the area. A staff member in Faculty-4 noted that this also relates to changing employers' perceptions of what an accredited programme is:

> The accreditation is more about individuals' own personal gain, so how that accreditation relates to what they're learning is fairly loose…Sometimes employers come to us and think that an accredited programme is a very rigid programme…and a lot of it won't be much use to them. And actually that's not really the case. (Staff Faculty-4)

The Dean of Faculty-2 stated that sometimes when employers came to the faculty, they already had a firm idea of what exactly they were looking for, but often they did not, and they just knew they wanted something that met their needs. It was felt that the process of assessing employer needs was time consuming, and initial pump priming was needed. From the Faculty's perspective it presented an opportunity to work more closely with employers, and thus make the courses more appropriate for employers, hopefully leading to better employment prospects for the graduates. Such closer working relationships with the employer offered opportunities for other areas of activity, for example, research.

According to a staff member in Faculty-2, it is difficult to find companies that are big enough and prepared to have a postgraduate scheme in place for the six months it takes for someone to get demonstrable experience, to have it signed off, and then to get the qualification. It was felt that the University therefore needs to move into a different WBL model rather than what was currently available. There was evidence of this in another faculty. The Dean of Faculty-6 mentioned a Foundation Degree for staff working within the prison service which is a validated award. The entire syllabus was developed by the faculty working very closely with the employer about their business aims and the Government's general aims for reducing reoffending.

For Faculty-5, developing a WBL course was about identifying the right people in the faculty who could engage with employers as they needed to be confident in setting up a dialogue with an employer. They mapped out what they thought would be needed and then carried out a focus group study to ascertain how this matched with employer requirements. Negotiation ensued, as Faculty-5 offered some modules that the client was not sure about, but agreed once faculty staff highlighted the value of those modules for the learners, which subsequently proved to be the modules that the learners enjoyed the most.

Despite exemplars of such ingenious negotiation, the general perception within faculties was that departments are currently trying to fit WBL into a system geared towards traditional, full-time students. While one suggestion was that WBL programmes needed to be less flexible to bring them more in line with the current structure, the majority of interviewees felt that

changes were required to make the existing structure more flexible. This showed a contradiction in views as one faculty perceived the employers did not wish to have flexibility, whereas others believed that employers wanted more flexibility. WBL programmes can start at any time in the year and finish at any time, so they do not necessarily follow the structure of the academic year. Nevertheless, the University uses the same infrastructure such as enrolment procedures, award boards etc., and these do not always fit in with the timescales that employers want. Evidently, this is an area that needs to be addressed at strategic level at the University.

This demonstrates that offering WBL is problematic, though the University continues to be fairly successful in this area. Nevertheless, Executive-1 acknowledged that it would become difficult to attract WBL students in future because of the recently increased fees. Previously, employers found the idea of HEFCE funding for their programmes attractive, but now the cost to employers would go up. She, however, emphasised the need to drive forward the programme of WBL even if there was only a small profit margin, while ensuring that it was viable, and the University got more out of it than just the money. It could even be promoted on the same scale as traditional programmes since it depended on demand, the University was good at WBL programmes, and it needed to diversify.

Curriculum, pedagogy and student involvement

Astin (1999) forwards the theory of student development that he labels as the Student Involvement Theory, which refers to the quantity and quality of the effort that the students devote to HE. From the perspective of an educator, the most important aspect of this theory is that the effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly linked to the extent to which it enhances student involvement. The main advantage of the Student Involvement Theory over traditional pedagogical approaches (including the subject-matter, the resource, and the individualised or eclectic theories) is that it diverts attention from curriculum and pedagogy and directs it towards student motivation, indicating that involvement can enhance motivation.

The Student Involvement Theory is as pertinent to WBL as it is to traditional HE, since involving WBL students in the learning can be just as challenging, if not more. Freeing up sufficient staff time to develop the curriculum in WBL, let alone teach it, is very labour intensive. Attempts to overcome this issue include having a bank of associates and buying out staff time. The latter requires a lot of planning in advance and this is problematic

because WBL is frequently required at short notice. Not having staff that have curriculum development skills is an obstacle, as not all educators are good in developing the curriculum. There is no clear guidance on how much of this type of work staff should be doing, as opposed to standard teaching.

Executive-2 acknowledged that there had to be a top down approach as well as a centralised process, and the Faculty Management Teams need to be firm advocates of WBL, ensuring that employer engagement and income generation is embedded, but also that WBL is part of the learning and teaching strategy. Furthermore, the pedagogy should encompass more coaching and mentoring rather than a didactic style of teaching. Time should be allowed in workload planning for professional development for the staff involved in WBL to embed it. However, it needs to run both horizontally and vertically, promoted by the faculties and ECD. It should not be seen as a supplementary activity, rather a fully-fledged part of University business.

The Dean of Faculty-1 stressed that the faculty preferred to work with employers on curriculum development, and used the method that the employer wanted. One member of Faculty-1 stated that stakeholders had a lot of input into developing the curriculum. The Dean of Faculty-3 disclosed that their WBL was not a full undergraduate degree or a full Master's programme. It was often a graduate certificate, a postgraduate certificate, or a short course. Faculty-2 staff had focused on developing not only the students' academic skills, but also their undergraduate engineering knowledge to ensure they had the underpinning theory:

> [The students] are perfectly competent in going and changing the system on an aircraft, but the actual theory as to why they do it, or what the engineering science is behind it, is what we're sort of trying to put in place...Very few of the modules are theory for theory's sake; we'd always try and contextualise anything that we do with what they do in the work place. (Staff Faculty-2)

This kind of pedagogical approach ensures that the employers are happy with the curriculum and the consequent learning of the employees, and academic standards are not compromised. Previous research indicates a mismatch between the requirements of the employer and the HEI about the learning outcomes and assessment, and suggests that employers are more interested in learning about professional competences rather than academic knowledge. It highlights the need for a balance between the assessment of academic knowledge and professional competence (QAA 2010). A member of Faculty-5

argued that it was not too difficult to retain a degree of academic freedom and match content and learning outcomes to employer requirements because it was about integrating aspects of the content that were relevant to the workplace, into the workplace. This corresponded with the view of a staff member of Faculty-3 who argued that WBL programmes had to be relevant to the job and this had to be made very clear to employers and learners. When employees did not want to be involved in a certain aspect of learning, the HEI needed to help them understand how the learning related to performance, thus blending theory and practice, and consequently enabling them to take ownership of their learning in a way that was very different from traditional undergraduate and postgraduate students.

It appears that WBL students are willing to develop and share, and the curriculum develops as learners and lecturers interact with one another. The different perspectives offered by learners also allow lecturers to expand their skills and knowledge. Ensuring quality at this stage depends on the quality of the learning contract and the identification of what the students want to do at the appropriate level for the award. Executive-3 believed that the responsibility for maintaining the level of quality as things change rested with all parties: the student, employer and academic. Quality assurance includes the process of validation, which has been simplified for WBL. Full validation is geared towards the curriculum, and as there is no formal curriculum to look at in NF, it is a case of ensuring that whatever curriculum is proposed is appropriate.

Negotiated WBL is highly individualised and maintaining the integrity and robustness of such awards can be an issue. Gibbs (2013:2) notes that while the curriculum is chosen by the employer and the quality is regulated by the university, workplace values and measures of success can only be allowed to 'reverse-colonise' the university to a limited extent without critical scrutiny. For this reason negotiation within a tripartite relationship is important, so that all parties are satisfied with the ultimate product. Executive-3 indicated that the process for NF awards did not differ greatly from that for traditional full-time and part-time awards, both of which rest on two main points: the external examiner process and the annual monitoring exercise. The external examiners for NF awards had to be more flexible in their approach as the assessments varied from student to student, and award leaders were responsible for producing, collecting and monitoring quality assurance information for WBL/NF programmes.

Conclusion

Research from other European countries such as Spain and Finland illustrates how the relationship between HEIs and employers in different sectors can change from being perceived as a potential association for innovation (Ramos-Vielba and Fernández-Esquinas, 2011) to a collaboration of negotiation of legitimate knowledge (Lehtimäki and Peltonen, 2013). The definition of legitimate knowledge in HE is a moot point. Arguably, some commentators perceive theoretical knowledge as the essence of HE, and responding to stakeholder needs as something valuable, but not to be classed as HE. Nevertheless, WBL is taught by HE staff; uses HE curriculum, albeit negotiated, and HE pedagogical practices; has similar enrolment procedures and assessment practices as other HE programmes; and usually culminates in an HE qualification, so should it not be considered as HE, though of the kind that has stakeholder interests at the heart of its programmes?

WBL is demand-driven and policy-led, and helpfully combines theory and practice for the benefit of the learners. The success of a WBL programme essentially depends on how involved the employees are and how much they have learned. The entire culture and systems of the University are by and large thought by some staff to go against WBL provision which is not ideal because WBL can have a positive impact on all concerned. Currently, the delivery of programmes and procedures at the University are sometimes not flexible enough. Also, HEIs have to be more creative as to how they take their product to market.

In congruence with Becker's (1993) theory of human capital, HEI culture needs to be linked with the Government's workforce development policy. Closer collaboration between HEIs and employers has been advocated by researchers in Malawi and Finland (see Hall & Thomas 2005; Yuzhuo 2013). Reeve and Gallacher (2005) recommend an enhanced dialogue and partnership between HEIs and employers, yet find the focus on HEI-employer partnership problematic and have a number of concerns. These relate to the limited evidence that employers want such partnerships; the different understandings of what constitutes learning and knowledge due to the different cultures; and the HEIs' quality assurance policy which diminishes the employers' influence on the development of WBL programmes.

However, our findings show that while viewed as problematic in some ways, University staff are generally eager to foster such partnerships. Indeed, to succeed in WBL programmes, HEI staff at all levels from Executive to Deans, coordinators, and tutors have to be enthusiastic about, and support, engaging with employers to promote WBL. Background

research, close collaboration with employers to determine their training needs, and releasing staff to teach at short notice when approached by employers, is crucial. Significantly, WBL should not be seen as a supplementary pursuit; rather an integral part of university activity.

A strategic approach to WBL, based on labour market intelligence, looking at the HEI's strengths and weaknesses and an awareness of competition, can be advantageous. Central support is helpful, though faculties emphasise the need for a dual approach as they believe they have expertise in specific programmes. There appears to be some tension regarding the 'ownership' of WBL programmes. The Centre stresses the need for a broader vision of WBL, and views the faculties' perception that they own a WBL programme as self-defeating; while the faculties insist they own the programme as they possess the specialist knowledge to ascertain if a relationship can be developed further, to culminate in a successful WBL award. This highlights the need for greater synergy between the Centre and the faculties.

Based on our findings (Basit et al. 2013), we suggest that improved WBL curriculum design and delivery requires new operational models for WBL programming and costing, recognition of prior competencies and flexible credit systems, and negotiated personal learner development. WBL 'brokers' are needed to 'build bridges' between employers and HEIs, and HEIs should offer more flexible and tailored courses instead of long programmes of study. The courses must be relevant and meet the needs of the organisation. 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 develop mechanisms to profile tutors and select those who have the relevant competencies and are able to use specific WBL methods, and to ensure similarity of standards. HEIs also ought to ensure that employers understand the language of academic quality. This is important because, as Huddleston and Laczik (2012) note, despite their enthusiasm and commitment, employers can be unfamiliar with the way qualifications are developed by HEIs.

Implications

It is evident that the key driver of HEI delivery is the championing of WBL at the senior/executive level. This is critical for influencing the extent to which employer engagement or responsiveness is seen as a strategic priority. Improved engagement of academia in WBL requires that WBL is viewed as a source for research and development. It is also crucial to change the attitude among staff in HEIs, some of whom tend to see the role of HEIs as providers of theoretical education rather than practical career development,

regarding WBL as *training* rather than *education*, inferring that since WBL is not *education*, it has no place in an HEI. Yet, universities are able to provide all types of knowledge and skills which can be useful to employees in the workplace. HEI staff must be trained in areas in which they lack the necessary skills, or when their current skills need to be updated, so that the teaching of WBL is of a high calibre and learner support can be assured.

WBL is an area that has a huge potential for growth. In the current climate when HEIs in some EU countries are in danger of losing traditional students because of increased fees, engaging with employers to devise WBL programmes should be put at the forefront of every university's agenda and development plan. Furthermore, it is important to remember that the goals of HE are not only monetary, but have an inherent social justice focus. HE transforms lives, not just of students coming to it through the conventional routes, but also those who engage with it by means of WBL, and it is worth keeping the following vision in mind:

> Our schools, universities, training and workplaces will foster equal opportunities, entrepreneurship, trust, co-operation, and a sense of responsibility, creativity and innovation, that will contribute to economic prosperity, societal good, engaged citizenship and personal well-being (EU 2010:9).

For this reason, universities need to actively promote WBL so that citizens, who have not had the opportunity to engage with HE due to reasons beyond their control, are not stuck in low-level semi-skilled occupations, with minimal chance of progression. To address their social justice goal, HEIs must make WBL as widely available as possible, regardless of the age, gender, ethnicity, social class, or (dis)ability of the employee. Importantly, there is a need for debate amongst Government policy makers, HEIs and employers about the best ways in which this objective can be achieved, and what resources can be made available to HEIs, employers and employees to promote the professional development of the workforce.

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