UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

GUIDANCE ON WORK-BASED LEARNING

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Guidance for Work-based Learning (WBL)

1: Background

This guidance is written in the context of the increasing national discussion/emphasis on employability, skills development for graduates and Continuing Professional Development (CPD). The issue was picked up by Sir Ron Dearing in his report on Higher Education which recommended that all students should be familiar with work and that the Government should seek ways of getting employers to offer more opportunities for work experience.[1] Employment skills feature in the HE Qualifications Framework[2] and have been a key aspect of QAA Subject Review visits.

Employability is one of the underlying reasons for the development of the Foundation Degree,[3] which is required to have both input from employers into the curriculum and a major WBL component. The importance of the Foundation degree has also been emphasised as an area for growth in the sector in the recent White Paper.[4] A number of employers have already approached the University about accreditation of their in-house training programmes. In addition, the development of Sector Skills Councils from the former National Training Organisations (NTOs) has led to a move towards the formalisation of National Occupational Standards (NOS) e.g. within the police force.

With the increase in modular programmes and the advent of credit, credit accumulation awards and credit transfer, the consideration of how students might be awarded 'credit' for learning other than that delivered in the classroom on a defined programme has become much more common. WBL is based on the underlying principle that learning can be:

- assessed wherever it takes place or is provided
- demonstrated to be appropriate for an award, and
- used to provide credit towards an award.

This Guidance is unable to provide the answers to all the questions surrounding WBL or even identify all the questions. However it identifies some that you should certainly ask before offering WBL, and the location of specialist expertise that may be of help to you. WBL focuses on individual student learning and therefore it can be demanding of staff resources, for example there may be a need to support students in a work setting and sometimes unusual types of assessment must be used. This document seeks to assist in exploring ways in which that cost may be minimised in order to make the positive gains from WBL activity.

2: What is Work-based Learning?

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[1] The National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, July 1997, Chapter 9, paragraphs 18 and 19

[2] The Framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, January 2001, Quality Assurance Agency, http://www.qaa.ac.uk/crntwork/nqf/ewni2001/contents.htm.

[3] Foundation degree: qualification benchmark (final draft), Quality Assurance Agency, http://www.qaa.ac.uk/public/foundation/foundation%5Fstatement%5Fdegree.htm.

[4] The Future of Higher Education, January 2003

WBL has been defined nationally as ‘Learning for, at or through work’.

For the purposes of assisting the University with supporting WBL, this very broad definition has not been used and this guidance refers to learning that involves work-place knowledge and skills either in the University or in the workplace and that is normally with the formal involvement of an employer or employers.

Credit for Work-based Learning may be gained in a work-related context within a module or programme of study offered or recognised by the University and its partners. **To be used in a programme of study, learning from work experience must be measured and assessed against specific learning outcomes.** Examples of such learning already taking place in University programmes include traditional sandwich courses, specific skills training in a particular profession e.g. nursing and the theoretical application of practical experience in part-time professional courses. WBL experience may include activity which is not paid employment.

WBL shares with APEL (for which there is a separate Guidance Note) considerable similarities in the nature of the learning and assessment process since they both represent learning from experience. It can encourage students to reflect on their actions and develop and refine their own conceptual models. These capabilities are of value when pursuing traditional learning and educational programmes as well as in the workplace and for lifelong learning.

3: Types of Work-based Learning

3.1 Generic WBL modules. These modules, available to undergraduate students, may foster transferable skills, which may be based on student work or voluntary activity. Such a module could be used in three different ways:

3.1 .1 as part of a standard undergraduate programme within the main subject-related syllabus or as a Module Outside Main Discipline (MOMD);

3.1 .2 as a separate certificated module in addition to the standard programme;

3.1 .3 as a stand alone module offered to external students.

3.2 . Specific modules available on defined programmes as follows:

3.2 .1 ‘traditional’ sandwich/industrial placements;

3.2 .2 clinical practice on health-related programmes of study;

3.2 .3 professional practice to support professional qualification.

3.3 Employer-based and employment-based schemes. This particular group covers a wide spectrum of activities:

3.3 .1 CPD-type programmes in which students use their current work experience on the programme to enhance their professional practice/individual needs;

3.3 .2 validated programmes;

3.3 .3 award of credit to employer-provided schemes;

3.3 .4 awards made on schemes negotiated with employers.

4: Generic Key Skills

The increasing importance of employability and the expectation that the knowledge and skills gained from work experience should not be gained in a passive way means that Generic Key Skills often have an enhanced role in the Learning Outcomes of WBL modules and programmes. An example of such a set of key skills is given in the table below. This has been taken from QCA documentation and refers to work at undergraduate level.

Keys Skills Elements which make up those key skills:

- Interpersonal
- Communication (influencing, oral and written communication, questioning, listening)
- Working with others (building relationships, interpersonal sensitivity)
- Information Handling
- Working with information (planning and organising, attention to detail), application of number, data and risk analysis
- Drawing conclusions (analysis, judgement, risk appreciation and working with uncertainty)
- Self-Application Getting started (creativity, decisiveness, initiative)
- Getting it done (adaptability, achievement orientation, tolerance to stress)
- Personal Development Improving own self-awareness and performance
- Developing enthusiasm for continuous learning

These skills can be developed at different levels and can be tailored to particular areas of work. Some good examples can be found in Brennan and Little.[5]

5: Planning and Implementation

Work-based learning can sometimes make different demands on both staff and students than campus-based delivery. Special consideration should therefore be given to the following:

5.1 General (Academic) Considerations

5.1 .1 The inclusion of WBL in School Plans and in School Learning and Teaching Strategies, especially where it has or might have a major place in the School curriculum. This may include a strategy and procedures for finding suitable employers or partners for WBL activity and some form of Risk Analysis, if appropriate.

5.1 .2 The definition of School procedures for supporting WBL, e.g. in relation to changes in staff contact time, the nature of that contact and the administration demands of record keeping for students on placement. There may also be a requirement for additional staff development where

[5] A Review of Work-based Learning in Higher Education, John Brennan and Brenda Little, DfEE, October 1996

staff are unfamiliar with the demands of WBL.

5.1 .3 The definition of procedures for allocating placements to students.

5.1 .4 The regulatory issues relating to placements, such as provision for failure if the experience cannot be replicated to enable re-submission.

5.1 .5 Contingency planning, for example, for one-off problems with an employer link such as the unexpected bankruptcy of an employer.

5.1 .6 In some professional areas of work, procedures for ensuring student Fitness to Practise.

5.1 .7 The learning time associated with a module. This can be more difficult to determine when (paid) work is part of the learning experience.

5.1 .10 Ensuring any WBL is part of a coherent assessment strategy with appropriate types of assessment. This will include relevant marking criteria eg. there may be occasions when the use of numerical marking is inappropriate. WBL often demands more innovative forms of assessment such as Learning Diaries and Portfolios. Student Progress Files are a means by which learning via work which is outside the curriculum can be recognised.

5.2 Relationships with employers or placement providers

5.2 .1 Determining the nature of the relationship with an employer according to the role of WBL in any programme. This may involve the development of a contract to govern that relationship. Contracts may need to cover a wide range of topics such as mechanisms for student support and reporting of student progress, legal responsibilities and the boundaries of any assessment role.

5.2 .2 Guidance for employers on their responsibilities to students eg with placements, it should be clear and agreed that the work experience provides appropriate learning opportunities.

5.2 .3 The provision of information by employers, where placement is involved, on working conditions and regulations and ensuring Health and Safety criteria are met. There might occasionally be issues relating to disabled students which need resolution.

5.2 .4 The additional stages in the approval process which need to be implemented, when WBL involves the accreditation of employer activity.

5.2 .5 Sensitivity to employer needs. There are occasions where students may be involved in projects or work which require confidentiality to be formally agreed eg where sensitive business information or personal information is involved.

5.2 .6 The potential for the same employer to be approached from a number of sources, if the development of student placement grows significantly.

5.3 Student Support and Information

5.3 .1 Emphasising the particular different expectations on students and arrangements made for those aspects within Guidance documentation.

5.3 .2 Making students aware of who is responsible for finding the work experience and how they might go about it if they are responsible, where a placement is the means for WBL.

5.3 .3 Student induction in the placement environment and expectations on them as employees, if they are normally full-time students at the University.

5.3 .4 Information for students on how to record their progress and achievements and fulfil the assessment of learning outcomes, particularly in those activities with which they might be less familiar, such as the production of portfolios or work in reflective practice.

5.3 .5 The provision of practical information such as Health and Safety, insurance matters, if appropriate, legal or ethical considerations, such as Criminal Records Bureau checks, occupational health related issues.

5.3 .6 The availability of tutorial support within the University and also any employer support. Students will need guidance on what to do if there are work problems which might affect their ability to achieve the learning outcomes.

5.4 Practical Issues

5.4 .1 Addressing all the practical issues and assigning responsibility for each.

5.4 .2 The provision of mechanisms for dealing with problems or complaints that all parties are aware of and can utilise.

5.4 .3 A review of additional considerations relating to WBL abroad e.g. language preparation, exploration of cultural norms, travel insurance.

6: Quality Assurance and monitoring of WBL

6.1 Credit-bearing WBL programmes and modules are set within the standard quality assurance processes within the University. Of these the following may need particular attention because of the specific demands of WBL. Where PSBs are involved, their procedures must also be taken into account.

6.2 External Examiners will be involved in monitoring WBL activity. Its special nature will impact on their:

- selection and appointment
- role and remit
- training and guidance

6.3 Clarity within and understanding of the assessment process is even more important than with other programmes and teaching because of the demands it makes, coupled with a greater lack of familiarity with some staff.

6.4 Development of formal or informal liaison mechanisms with employers for the purposes of:

- development of programmes or modules
- management of placement programmes
- provision of feedback on individual students or a whole arrangement

6.5 Provision of student support and feedback mechanisms and procedures for dealing with any feedback received whether on student progress or the employment experience.

7: Conclusions/Where to go from here

WBL is an alternative form of learning which has a value in a certain set of circumstances as outlined in the early part of this document. Like other forms of flexible learning it is expected to fit into the standard procedures and structures of the University as far as possible. It does, however, make additional demands on the organisation, staff and students which are covered in these guidance notes. This document has served as a pointer to why and where those variations occur. If you are intending to introduce some form of WBL into one of your programmes, or have been approached by an employer to accredit work they already do, you might first wish to consult the Director of Learning and Teaching in your School or your School Contact in Planning and Policy Development for advice. In addition, below there are a number of web references of information on specific topics and some documents and studies you might find useful.

7.1 Web references

National Council for Work Experience: http://www.work-experience.org

General information and background on work experience

Learning and Teaching Support Network:
http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/index.asp

There is a document in their assessment series on WBL

QAA Code of Practice on Placement Learning: http://www.qaa.ac.uk

Useful organisational and procedural checklist (this guidance draws on some of it)

QAA Draft Benchmark Statement on Foundation Degrees: http://www.qaa.ac.uk

Not yet finalised but one of the few documents laying out information on Foundation degrees

Information on NTOs and SSCs can be found at http://www.nto-nc.org and http://www.ssdauk.co.uk

Although now defunct, the NTO website still has useful information

Academic Office information (being updated and revised):
http://www.ao.bham.ac.uk

APEL, UG and PG regulations, PDP's

European Commission on Lifelong Learning:
http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/education/life

Contains statements on policy and practice

7.2 Other References

Capability and its development: experiences from a work-based doctorate, Kathy Doncaster and Stan Lester, Studies in Higher Education Volume 27, No 1, 2002

Discussion of professional capability and how this might be used and applied to bring WBL to Doctoral level study

'Think through the implications of Work-based Learning' taken from Exchange, Issue 2 (Summer 2002), Margaret Noble and Barbara Paulency

Specific focus on staffing issues (academic, admin and academic-related) of WBL

Enhancing Employability, Recognising Diversity: Making links between higher education and the world of work (2002). UUK and CSU

A set of Case Studies on different types of activity in a number of Universities including the MPhilB History, Film and Television at Birmingham. In doing so, the document identifies many of the key principles of WBL and how they have been achieved.

Extract from Special issue of The Digest, Centre for Higher Education Research and Information

Section on Work Experience with identification of a number of DfEE projects on WBL,

http://www.open.ac.uk/cheri/digest_truffle.htm

A Review of WBL in HE, DfEE Quality Support Centre, John Brennan and Brenda Little, October 1966

Detailed background document on all aspects of WBL. Includes context, history, philosphical discussion, of skills, employability, WBL. Contains details of case studies and practical examples of measurement of competencies, samples of learning objectives, skills by level of study, WBL task list covering all aspects of monitoring and support.

Betts, M & Smith R (1998). Developing the Credit-Based Modular Curriculum in Higher Education: challenge, choice and change, London, Falmer Press.

Work-related Learning, DFES 2000, Richard Brown

An exploration of how to promote good practice in WBL.

Guidance notes for Work-based Learning (WBL)

Appendix: GLOSSARY OF TERMS

AP(E)L

The assessment of prior learning which may either be certificated (APL) or based on prior experience including work experience (APEL).

CREDIT

Credit provides a means of quantifying learning outcomes achievable in a given number of notional hours and at a given level. In this way previous learning can be identified which can be assessed and 'credited' against an award.

CREDIT TRANSFER

Credit transfer is the process by which that credit which is relevant can be assigned to a programme other than that on which it was gained.

CPD

CPD is continuing professional development. This is an expectation of many professional occupations and may be offered by employers themselves or by educational institutions. It may simply be the subject of attendance at training sessions or have credit or awards attached. Current initiatives relating to skills development and Lifelong Learning are increasing the focus on this means for learning. In addition to the above, there has been a move to give weight to learning which might replace some of the traditional knowledge on a course or give credit for employer provided in-house training.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Learning Outcomes are statements of what the learner should know, understand and/or be able to do at the end of a module or programme. Learning Outcomes are an important aspect in the process of determining credit against any award. The process is refined by the use of Levels Descriptors.

LEVELS DESCRIPTORS

Academic levels descriptors are generic statements describing the characteristics and context of learning expected on a developmental continuum in which preceding levels are necessarily subsumed in those which follow. The QAA HE Qualifications Framework has a set of levels descriptors. Specific learning outcomes and assessment criteria can be reviewed against levels descriptors.

LIFELONG LEARNING

Lifelong Learning is well-summed in this direct quote of an EU definition: 'all learning activity undertaken throughout life, with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competence, within a personal, civic, social and/or employment-related perspective.'

PROFESSIONAL AND STATUTORY BODIES (PSBs)

Those organisations who have a role in the accreditation of certain career groups such as the General Medical Council or the Law Society.

SECTOR SKILLS COUNCILS AND NATIONAL TRAINING ORGANISATIONS AND NATIONAL

OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS (NOS)

The Sector Skills Councils were formed from 'NTOs which were described as the recognised voice of employers on the skills and people development needs of UK industry and employment sectors. NTOs work to enhance the competitiveness and prosperity of the UK by improving the skills and competence of people in all sectors of the economy.' They are overseen by the Sector Skills Development Agency which is part of DfES.