

Work-based learning in higher education: an international context

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Outline

- What is work-based learning (partnerships)?
- Rationale for work-based learning
- The problem of terminology
- Key features of WBL programs
- Issues for assessment and teaching
- Challenges

The Society for Research into Higher Education

Work-based Learning

A New Higher
Education?



edited by
David Boud and
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What is work-based learning?

- Work-based learning describes a class of programs that bring together universities and work organizations to create new learning opportunities in workplaces.
 - Such programs meet the needs of learners, contribute to the longer-term development of the organization and are formally accredited as university courses.
- Wide variation in the mix of elements they include:
 - from tailored versions of existing courses delivered in the workplace with some work-related assessment activities, to programs which focus closely on the learning needs of highly specific work.
 - Of particular interest are those programs which depart substantially from a disciplinary framework and which develop new pedagogies for learning.

Work-based learning partnerships

Examples:

- At undergraduate level
 - Trainee pilots in an airline
 - Employees of a large supermarket chain
- At postgraduate level
 - Sales performance company
 - National coaching network

Common characteristics

- The needs of the organization are not accommodated by existing courses or educational institutions
- Competency frameworks for existing occupations/professions are unsuitable or too rigid
- Organisations want more than in-house training
- Employees want recognized credentials that suit the work they do and aspire to
- University credentials rather than VET credentials are desired, though VET credentials can be nested within them
- Learners are not tied to one location, one country, except perhaps for orientation

The challenge for different countries

Determined by national conventions:

- Barriers between higher education and vocational education
 - In some systems this is so rigid as to inhibit cooperation
- Assumptions about what constitutes vocational education, where it takes place and who does it
 - Singapore has a central role of Polytechnics for younger people, separate adult learning arrangements for older adults, dual sector institutions becoming common in many countries
- National qualifications/competency frameworks can enable and restrict
 - Are frameworks occupation/profession specific or can they be generic? Are they tightly or loosely coupled?
- Funding models or course quotas can create or inhibit new forms of WBL
 - Although the UK has funding models that inhibit normal part-time study, unlike Australia, it can accommodate new WBL models

Rationale for work-based learning

- Learning *about* work and *for* work should occur *in* work, not primarily in educational institutions
- Educational institutions should equip learners with the means to learn, wherever that occurs
- Educational institutions are not the repositories for and definers of all knowledge

The problem of terminology in the area of work and learning

- There is common language to describe the different practices of different systems even within one country
- Work-integrated learning has become the generic phrase in higher education to describe all possible arrangements
 - From placements to fully integrated work experiences
 - Where learning at work is part of the curriculum
 - Not only working, but needs a learning dimension

The range of work-integrated learning

- The work component of courses has many descriptions
- But, we can also think of the course component of work!
- Being challenged by practising for real or through simulation within an educational institution

Who is it for?

- Initial vocational education at secondary level
- Initial vocational education at higher education level
- Vocational education at any time
- Experience of work for students

Occasions of work-based learning

- Pre-employment (least common)
 - Concurrent with employment
 - Post-employment
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- To learn work
 - To transform work

Key features of WBL programs

1. *Framework of levels and standards* that can encompass wide range of specific content
2. *Planning mechanism* that identifies a learners starting competence/ level and the outcomes being sought
3. *Negotiation process* in ensure all parties are satisfied with the plan and the outcomes. Often involves formal sign-off by each party
4. *Program of activities* to be pursued, and standards and criteria for accomplishment specified (normal part of the sign off)
5. *Review points* and feedback mechanisms to ensure program is enacted as agreed or renegotiated as necessary
6. Final *external review* mechanism involving key parties

Assessment issues

- Because programs are negotiated, assessment of learning outcomes varies across individuals
- Assessment process is determined in advance for each learning plan
- Need for common generic framework of standards and levels and common understanding of how it is interpreted

Changing role of the teacher (or disappearance of 'teaching')

No longer:

- the master/expert
- guardian of subject knowledge

Now:

- adviser
- navigator/negotiator of options
- learning coach

Current directions

- Organisation-specific programs
 - With elements fixed, from an existing course and negotiated
- Hybrid programs
 - Mix of work-based components with other forms of study, face-to-face or online
 - Partially negotiated with some elements fixed
- Cross-sectoral programs
 - A higher education wrap with VET components

Current challenges

- Overcoming arbitrary constraints of systems
 - Governmental
 - Institutional
 - Professional/occupational
- Creating sufficiently flexible institutions
 - Able to negotiate with partners (employers, professional associations, new entities)
 - Wide acceptance of credit transfer and prior learning (general and specific)
- Re-orienting educational personnel
 - Changing roles from teaching
 - Towards advising and negotiation
- Conceptualising new pedagogies
 - Taking seriously the agency of learners

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This document is part of the online documentation of the BIBB Congress
in Berlin on 7 and 8 June 2018:

“Learning for the future. VET of tomorrow – experience innovations”

Publisher

Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB)

Robert-Schuman-Platz 3

53175 Bonn

Internet: <https://kongress2018.bibb.de/en/>