

A reflective review of a responsive negotiated work-based learning framework (NWBL): its impact on the university internal structures and external relationships.

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The goals of this learning framework are:

- to widen participation to Higher Education by extending the nature and scope of the University HE Portfolio to those in work who would not normally attend University courses;
- to provide flexible learning frameworks where the needs of both the employer and learner are central to the development of the agreed programme of learning;
- to evidence that the agreed programmes of learning, directly relevant to the needs of the employer and aspirations of the learner, are actually attained.

For industry to support education and training it must provide a relevant cost benefit to the employer. The content and design of the learning on offer must be capable of not only sustaining the candidate's willingness and ability to learn but also respond to the ever-changing environment within which industry operates. Any learning framework needs to accommodate not only the changing needs of industry and its diversity of experiential learning provision but also provide for a range of learning styles commensurate with learner's needs (Goodwin and Forsyth, 2000). The importance of such learning developments has also been put forward by others (Fryer, 1997; Gunther, 1999; Department for Education and Employment, DfEE 1998, 2000; Higher Education Funding Council for England, HEFCE 2001; Gray, 2001 and Harvey, Locke and Morey, 2002). Considerable benefit has also been reported from appropriate learning experiences in the workplace (The Institute of Management, IM 2000).

Our learning framework encompassing a partnership of the employer, participant and the University was developed through discussions with a range of interested industrialists from both large and small organisations, and validated through the normal University procedures, providing both undergraduate and Masters Awards including intermediate certificates and diplomas with design criteria (Goodwin and Forsyth, 2000) which:

- validate realistic and relevant work related experience and learning which enables 'aspiration' to be converted into 'attainment' for identified ranges of experiences, academic levels and occupational standards;
- provide 'enjoyable' learning experiences so that learning will be sustained and so develop within the organisation via the combined personal developments and attitudes of its participants a 'can-do' culture;
- support on-going staff development and up dating for both the employer organisation and University tutors;
- support the development and application of emotional competencies and employability attributes through an increase in self-confidence, communication and empathy with others in order to both reflect more effectively and improve their employability;
- demonstrates a fitness for purpose in order to satisfy both academic and industry credibility;
- reflect the up to date needs of the three key drivers of industry.

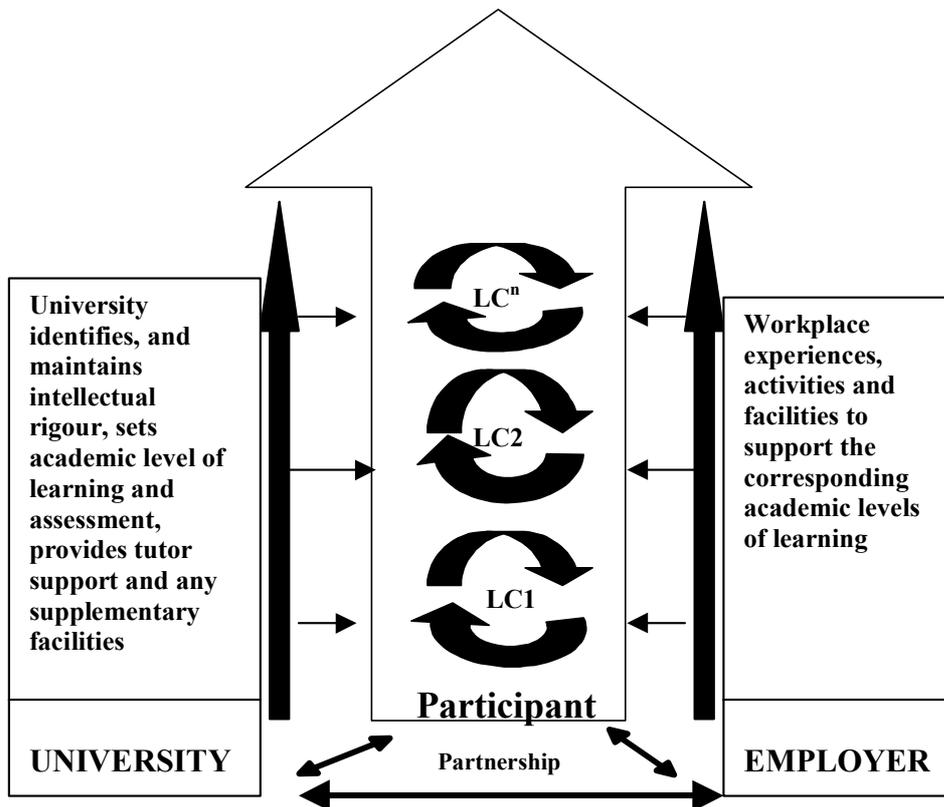
In order for an organisation and/or industry to sustain its viability it must also support through its learning activities 3 key industry drivers identified (a good exemplar is given in Hospitality Training Foundation, HtF 2001) as:

- the development and utilization of best professional practice;
- the use and application of up to date relevant knowledge, skills and technologies;

- successful innovation, for example, products, services, problem-solving strategies.

The NWBL framework was validated requiring the participant to complete a series of negotiated learning contracts at appropriate levels in order to attain the level and volume of credit required to achieve a given award. Academic level is determined by the use of University approved generic level descriptors. The overall structure is given in Fig.1.

Fig.1 Outline Award Structure



In figure 1, LC1 – LCⁿ indicate the learning contracts (LC), which must be successfully achieved for progression and the attainment of academic credit. Each LC is encompassed by the learning cycle required to support the appropriate learning. Each LC indicates a mini Kolb cycle utilising both simulations and work-based learning in order to achieve the required level of learning, personal development and increments of academic credit. The whole is underpinned by a partnership of the University, employer and participant. For the purposes of this paper employability is considered to be the sum of up to date relevant academic attainment, the development of personal attributes, evidence of the effective application of the three key business drivers to a range of situations. This will require analysis, evaluation and reflection to be used to contribute to learning in subsequent learning contracts.

The Learning Contracts are constructed to ensure that the candidate is required to:

- Identify and elicit the required information using appropriate sources and methodologies;
- Use and develop analytical and evaluatory skills gained from past activities in new situations;
- Reflect upon the effect of previous activities and use what is learned in future activities;

- Use the knowledge, skills and understanding gained and subsequent new information identified to meet the requirements of the current learning cycle and contract;
- Produce measurable outcomes for the purposes of assessment at the appropriate academic level and also where appropriate indicate any incremental gain in emotional competencies all informed by the three key business drivers. This goal-based approach is supported elsewhere (Schanck, 1999; Forsyth, 2002a, 2002b; Goodwin and Forsyth, 2000; Forsyth and Goodwin, 2002).

This structure requires the participant to lead the process of developing the content and activities within the learning contract supported by the University Tutor to ensure that the appropriate academic levels and learning outcomes can be attained. When the Learning Contract has been validated by the University appropriate University staff are responsible for assessing the participant's work and progressing the assessment marks through the normal university quality assurance boards.

The academic credibility of this work-based learning framework, including any embedded simulations, is underpinned utilizing educational philosophy (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1987) and the work of further workers in this field whose activities inform the evolutionary process (Lyons and Bement, 1996; Bement, 1997; Costley, Doncaster, Garnett, Ferreira, 1999; Goodwin and Forsyth, 2000; Kreber, 2001; and Forsyth and Goodwin, 2002). Ideally this should bring about a knowledge community, bridging the worlds of education and work (Boud and Solomon, 2000), and considerably reduce the significant differences between the academic and employment environments which militate against learning transfer (Candy and Crebert, 1990; Chalkley and Harwood, 1998), and satisfy the need to build skills through subsequent practice via a range of contexts (Cherniss and Goleman, 1998 and Toohey, 1999). This approach is compatible with the notion that motivation and interest are particularly important in learning transfer and sustained transfer of interpersonal skills to the work place (Axtell, Maitlis, and Yearta, 1997; Alexander and Murphy, 1999). This framework is also compatible with other published design criteria (University for Industry, Ufi 2000).

External relationships

The initial programmes were validated in response to demands from a range of employers. A very successful pilot grouping was undertaken and is still successfully growing based on the original format with some 'spin-off' frameworks also being introduced in specialist areas.

As the participating employer base has widened some of the recent employer partners have indicated that the jump from traditional University to fully flexible programmes is too great either for conceptual reasons or lack of available employer input. Consequently, a range of less flexible work-based learning frameworks has evolved to accommodate this. Others have requested the development of be-spoke work-based learning awards at Foundation Degree level, which are currently under development.

Pressures on industry have encouraged a growing number of companies to contract out their training to third party private providers. Currently, the contribution that such third party providers may make is under active discussion with interested potential partners.

The success of relevant work-based learning is also posing the question of whether the University should maintain its normal collaborative arrangements with employers or consider further developing these links into strategic alliances, widening the two way range of collaboration such as research and development so further embedding University expertise into the employer organisation with the bonus of associated development of university staff. Such questions have also been posed elsewhere (Burns and Chisholm, 2002).

During the validation process the support for the programme by a range of professional bodies and the then National Training Organisations enhanced the credibility of the awards with employers. The programmes will need to be discussed with the emerging Sector Skills Councils. The University further developed its possible penetration of the market by being accredited to deliver University for

Industry's (Ufi) Learning through Work on-line learning management support platform. The University has its own on-line learning platform and can therefore offer a choice.

As these learning frameworks became more widely known invitations have been received to join regional projects as well as to review, moderate and advise upon both existing frameworks and similar proposals by other Higher Education Institutions.

Internal structures

The original validation was based upon a central organisation to recruit and administer the whole programme with its own quality assurance and Award Board. This was and still is very successful but it did not follow all the traditional structures in the University having had its own procedures separately validated. In this instance University schools were asked to supply tutors of the appropriate expertise to service this programme. The reports from the external examiners were very complimentary on the administration and progress and tutoring of the candidates. As a result of this sustained success the University later felt that the framework should be devolved to University Schools so that it could be more easily customised to meet the needs of the markets that they served. The Schools are supported in this changeover and the evolution of their own programmes by the previous Programme Manager.

The initial NWBL validation nominates the participant to provide and evidence the learning outcomes and the learning activities being undertaken; a reversal of the normal process requiring a major cultural shift in the mindset of the University. Consequently, the role of the University tutor in the original programme was changed to that of a facilitator (Gray, 2001) and required considerable staff and candidate development. This has and still is working very well in some University Schools. However, in order to simplify the organisation of the award, keep lecturing staff onboard and accommodate the widening range of needs evolving from an increasing employer base, a number of developments have taken place including customised modules already in validation with which tutors are already familiar, as well as the development of hybrid programmes using standard modules plus learning contracts.

Another approach has been to validate independent study modules with generic outcomes together with generic assessment criteria which may be undertaken in the workplace. These do not require revalidation each time they are used so simplifying the management and monitoring processes. These latter developments require a more traditional approach from tutors while meeting the core needs of employer, candidate and University. An additional advantage of these changes is that all students' work irrespective of programme of study are able to be processed through the traditional subject and award boards and quality assurance procedures making University internal and external audits simpler.

The devolvement across University Schools has initiated a review of all the Accreditation of Prior Achievement methodologies in operation in order to update and disseminate best practice across the University. All these activities have also informed the University's review of its strategic and collaborative policies with industry and the structures required to support this.

The widening employer base has highlighted its geographical spread with a large number of small and micro businesses competing alongside international and national branded chains. Consequently the range and depth of experience and learning offered by industry can be very variable. For a participant to be able to evidence, via an agreed learning contract learning at a given academic level, the work place must be able to provide the participant with commensurate work activities and experiences. Where this does not occur our reviews strongly suggest that suitable tailor made simulations may be used to supplement learning contracts (Forsyth, 2002a; 2002b; Forsyth and Goodwin, 2002), which together with work-based learning can provide the personal attributes sought by industry (Association of Graduate recruiters, AGR 1995; Skills Task Force, STF 2000 and Harvey, Locke and Morey,

2002). This learning framework reinforces the role of personal development planning in attaining the identified academic award and associated continuing professional development.

The continuing development of these internal structures to meet external demand enables a fully flexible through to a fully prescribed range of award frameworks to be on offer to our collaborative partners.

Conclusion

The success and the widening of the pilot have resulted in the devolvement of the framework to all University Schools. This has enabled some Schools, after a period of review, familiarisation and validation to further adapt the framework to meet their and customer requirements. The goals have been shown to have been met, however there is a caveat namely:

The ongoing global, socio economic and technological pressures on industry will require the University to continually review and adapt its methods of delivery in order to support and sustain the viability of industry through the availability and utilisation of appropriate skills at all levels. The challenge will be to provide a timely response to these changing needs with relevant and evolving modes and levels of study while maintaining both academic and industrial credibility. However, should not this caveat also apply to the normal university full and part-time vocational awards?

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Mike Goodwin is an Academic Development Manager in the Office for Collaborative Academic Developments of the University of Wolverhampton. He has special responsibility for initiating and supporting the development and validation of modes of study appropriate to the changing socio economic market and competitive pressures affecting both industry and academic sectors. He led the University team which developed the Negotiated Work-based Learning mode of study at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and successfully saw this mode of study encompassed within the University.