
Frameworks for work-based learning

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Introduction

The fundamental difference between work-based learning [WBL] programmes and more traditional curricula is the emphasis in the former, by definition, on learning that takes place in the workplace rather than in educational institutions. The meaning of 'the workplace' as a general concept seems clear enough, and as such the term features regularly in policy statements and reports, giving an impression of homogeneity. However, it is equally acknowledged (although often overlooked at policy level) that 'workplaces' in particular, together with 'employers' and 'employees', are in reality extremely diverse and often have rapidly changing needs. So, if institutions are to meet the Leitch (2006) challenge of engaging increased numbers of those already in the workplace in higher level learning, key questions concerning how meaningful workplace learning may be designed are raised:

- What processes and mechanisms can academic institutions, whose core business traditionally consists of provider-led programmes, use to develop more customised – even individualised – programmes of study?
- How can these programmes be framed within the academic infrastructure to ensure equivalent value with other higher education programmes?
- What do negotiated, flexible work-based learning programmes look like?

One response to the need for appropriate structures and processes for negotiating studies is for institutions to work through a credit-based academic framework designed specifically for work-based learning. The embedded use of academic credit in higher education, based on notional learning hours and the achievement of stated learning outcomes, enables the award of qualifications to be defined in relation to the learner rather than the course content alone. This principle of outcome-based credit means that learning that takes place outside universities can be recognised, including knowledge that is constructed and expertise that is gained in the workplace. The concept and definition of credit 'level' is also central in representing a freeing-

up of opportunities to recognise a broader spectrum of higher level learning outside the university. A fit for purpose WBL framework is useful, therefore, in providing a means of enabling learners in the workplace both to process and to present ideas and experience in ways that allow their learning to be accredited and thereby lead to qualifications. The framework infrastructure can facilitate institutions in working quickly and responsively with both organisations and individuals to agree appropriate means of meeting workforce development needs.

In the absence of pre-specified course content, the structure of a WBL framework can help learners to shape what they want to do, situate the learning in higher education and fulfil the important role of demonstrating equivalence. Institutions designing a WBL framework have found it useful to map this against aspects of the academic infrastructure. The QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications [FHEQ] provides the overarching qualifications framework that gives WBL, as much as other types of higher level learning, its currency and meaning within the context of higher education, particularly with regard to level. It is important that work-based learners, through assessment, demonstrate how they meet the QAA requirements for an honours degree or other qualification, and thereby receive credit or an award reflecting an equivalence of challenge and rigour. To have parity, the WBL award must also be accommodated within the local assessment regulations and associated procedures that apply across a particular institution.

Notwithstanding the importance of situating work-based learning in the currency and culture of higher education in this way, a WBL framework is more than an administrative convenience for institutions. One of its strengths lies in introducing learners to the underlying principle of identifying and articulating their tacit knowledge learnt through the workplace (Eraut, 2004) by providing a means for both learners and tutors to think and talk together about this knowledge. When the starting point for learning is not subject content provided by a higher education institution or further education college, a WBL framework provides a tool, a way for learners to recognise and structure their learning, through the development of appropriate skills and attitudes, such as reflection (Moon, 1999).

What can a work-based learning framework look like?

While it is not essential, institutions that deliver significant amounts of WBL have generally found the validation of a specialised work-based learning framework to be useful. Such a framework is designed to facilitate the accreditation, within higher education, of work-based and work-related learning and provides for the negotiation of appropriate learning routes either by organisations or individuals, or by a combination of both.

Fundamental to the design of an effective WBL framework is the use of level descriptors to indicate common, generic characteristics of learning, irrespective of

subject content or learning context. Such level descriptors would relate to those in the FHEQ, and can be translated into module learning outcomes. These in turn can usefully be supported by level-related assessment and marking criteria, which may be derived from a generic institution-wide framework, but in this context be expressed in terms relevant to learning in and from the workplace.

The basic structure of a WBL framework will be familiar to the sector, and reflects the structure for many undergraduate frameworks. Modules, as ‘chunks’ of credit, provide the building blocks that can be shaped into flexible programmes with relevant content, processes and assessment that are given academic recognition according to level:

FHEQ Level 1 (C)/NQF Level 4 – 120 credits
FHEQ Level 2 (D)/NQF Level 5 – 120 credits
FHEQ Level 3 (H)/NQF Level 6 – 120 credits
FHEQ Level 4 (M)/NQF Level 7 – 180 credits
FHEQ Level 5 (D)/NQF Level 8

Modules within a WBL framework might be based around different-sized blocks of credit; for example, all might be based on 20 credits or vary from as high as 60 credits for some modules to as low as five or ten credits in other cases. For an individual institution, the WBL framework might be based upon, or aligned with, their standard modular framework, but will be more finely tuned and fit for purpose with regard to the types of modules that it incorporates. It might also allow for the inclusion of smaller credit blocks than might be feasible within an institution-wide modular scheme.

There are a number of aspects that might be said to characterise the distinctiveness of a work-based learning framework as compared to a standard institutional modular framework (see Table I).

Table 1: Common distinctive characteristics of fit-for-purpose work-based learning frameworks

Characteristic	Purpose
Flexibility to negotiate and customise learning programmes and award titles without going through a full validation process for each one	Efficiency and responsiveness of institution to employer and individual learner demand
Level descriptors that can be translated into learning outcomes and assessment criteria	Locate WBL within HE through benchmarking against FHEQ qualifications descriptors
Pre-validation of modules	Modules used as the basis for negotiating customised programmes specific to work-related needs and interests
The nature of pre-validated modules promoting the development of certain key skills and approaches to WBL	Prepare learners to undertake negotiated programmes through, e.g. self-review process, research methods for WBL etc
Pre-validated ‘template’ or ‘shell’ modules emphasising experiential learning	Enable learners actively to build into their studies learning and knowledge generated through their own workplace
The facility to select from a bank of specific work-related taught modules, within a specified proportion or credit limit	Learners might choose to include these in their programme of study
The facility to include a proportion of taught modules selected from other subject disciplines within the institution, within a specified credit limit	Learners might choose to include these in their programme of study to reflect their own interests or specialisms
A learning contract or agreement for individually negotiated programmes of study	Formalises the process of negotiating individual programmes and defines the outcome reflected in the agreed award title
Flexibility over size of credit-rated modules that can be offered	Enables smaller or larger credit chunks than might otherwise be feasible in a standard institutional modular framework, to reflect employer need
Identification of proportion of accreditation of prior experiential learning [AP(E)L] available, where relevant and coherent to the negotiated route	Learners can identify areas where they can claim general or specific credit towards their awards through using clear procedures in the context of their learning programme

Pre-validation of modules intended to be used as a basis for negotiated experiential learning may be undertaken through the design of ‘template’ or ‘shell’ modules, which are based on the traditional module descriptors model, but outline only generic learning outcomes rather than any specific content. This generality, however, could be seen as a potential problem, in that this approach might appear not to describe or

explain to a busy employer or potential learner exactly what it is that can be studied. This is why a dialogue is both important and necessary, so that tutors can engage in the process of interpreting the rules to learners and learners can explore and analyse their learning needs with reference to their own contexts. Modules and learning outcomes can then be customised, and programmes negotiated. Such programmes might include a proportion, within limits specified in the framework, of taught modules from a work-based learning bank or from a separate subject discipline within the institution in order to build an individual programme, the coherence of which will be reflected in the negotiated title of the award.

A framework is a way of providing the rules within which an institution works to negotiate and map a degree or other qualification. A WBL framework needs to be facilitative, not restrictive – but as with all types of open learning, the more extensive the dimensions of flexibility, the greater the need for a structure clearly defining the scope and limits of that flexibility. The WBL framework is the boundary – within those parameters there is freedom to be imaginative and responsive. There is an important distinction to be made between the negotiable and the non-negotiable elements; level, for example, is non-negotiable and defined nationally in the FHEQ. Other non-negotiable elements may be institutional and regulations will vary with regard to ‘cultural tolerance’. Will local regulations permit, for example, the award of smaller ‘chunks’ of five or ten credits, which are often more appropriate to a workforce development setting?

Using a framework with learners and employers

Frameworks facilitate the negotiation of programmes and drive the agreement of learning contracts by providing the structure for designing flexible curriculum. In this way, the product – the framework – is also the way of working, a method or process, but this can be hard to explain to employers and potential learners in comparison to a traditional academic curriculum that details and specifies content. This can raise practical issues – if this is to be the mechanism for an employer’s workforce development, it is important to be able to give some idea of what the programme is going to look like, and to show how the pedagogic approach meets the outcomes both of the learners and of the organisation that employs them.

In talking to employers, ‘the framework’ can be introduced and explained as an infrastructure that can allow people in their workplace to gain academic credit for learning through work. It can also help employers to identify their workforce development needs through the design and sequencing of learning into study programmes that, while different from an academic subject curriculum, still adhere to the principles of logical development and coherent structure. It can be a huge task for an individual or employer to articulate what they want, but this process can be assisted through the work of academic staff acting as consultants in the early stages of engagement.

The advantage of a more open type of framework is that it sets out to everyone the underlying principles of work-based learning. The primary principle is of experiential learning, gained day to day on the job, as opposed to taught 'work-related' modules. In some cases, a model will be designed that includes elements to meet an employer's specific needs, together with the scope for personalisation for individual learners in other aspects of the programme. Notional hours of learning used to estimate credit value are based on all types of learning, and in this context will clearly include equivalent hours spent learning at work.

This can then be turned into a learning contract or agreement. For each level of study, students on individually negotiated routes might complete some form of an approved studies learning agreement in consultation with their personal tutor, which can then be submitted to the programme team for approval.

Using an established validated framework, within which programmes can be designed and approved, can also alleviate the often laborious process of authorisation and speed up the institutional response time to employers. Institutions should not necessarily be restricted to thinking of traditional honours or even foundation degrees at the start; employers may want only one module initially or perhaps a short award, for example, a Certificate of Credit of ten to 110 credits, or a Professional Certificate of 60 credits. This has the advantage of enabling the learning relationship to become established between all parties, which may then lead to the development of progression opportunities for further learning either for full cohorts or on an individual basis. Both employers and employees may be more inclined to become engaged with higher level workforce development following a positive initial experience with a successful outcome, and the framework can set smaller awards or modules within a 'climbing frame' for progression.

Frameworks and institutions

Institutions may find that a distinct WBL framework offers the facility to be more flexible – or more specific – than is feasible within a more standardised institutional modular scheme. For example, a standard framework may have compulsory requirements relating to core or optional modules that are inappropriate for a work-based learner, for whom there may be different core requirements, such as a self-review module. A WBL framework, through its characteristics, defines the identity of its programmes of learning; its rules – although not its regulations – may distinguish it from other programmes in the institution.

There are a number of operational factors that institutions intending to introduce a WBL framework may wish to consider. For example, the use of a WBL framework enables flexible start and end times at different points within the year. This accommodates a range of provision where credit, not the full-time academic year, can be the organising principle, although the organisation of institutional systems around

the time lines and life cycles of the full-time student can create operational restrictions. An example of this is in the timing of assessment boards and the relationship to the funding methodology with regard to progression and achievement.

The approval processes for WBL programmes are based clearly on an academic model, in order for the academic credit gained through WBL to have validity and currency within the wider conventions of higher education. One, but not the only, value of a fully-validated WBL framework is that it can facilitate quicker institutional responsiveness by avoiding having to take everything through full approval in each individual case – programmes can be created by slotting contextualised content and outcomes into the module boxes. It can be questioned whether the modular framework, organised by empty boxes with labels, titles and specified hours, in fact tends to constrain thinking about whether studies might potentially be planned more thematically, but a sufficiently open framework can nonetheless provide the flexibility and the structure to meet both the needs of learners and the requirements of institutions.

Institutions have found it important to examine and determine the level at which programme approval powers can operate. At what level is authority vested to negotiate and approve modules or programmes of study and learning contracts, and through what procedure? This authority could potentially be assigned at the level of the individual tutor, the WBL team, an approval panel or a full validation event. Some institutions that use their WBL framework in the design of foundation degrees still take that level of award through a full validation procedure. At one institution, foundation degree proposals that include at least 40 credits of modules from the WBL framework at each level can be approved through a designated standing approval panel, whose membership is drawn from across the institution. This panel meets on a monthly basis to consider the authorisation of all new provision for employers that has been designed using the framework. The panel also monitors individually negotiated programmes that have been approved by the WBL team, including those modules customised from pre-validated 'templates'. Some institutions' WBL teams have delegated authority to negotiate and approve credit for individual modules. In some schemes, the full learning contract or individual learning pathway can be approved and signed by an individual tutor; in others, authority to approve the learning agreement and proposed award title resides at the level of the full programme team.

There are also organisational questions relating to where within the institution the ownership of the validated WBL framework resides. Does the framework belong to one school or faculty, or to the whole institution? Do programmes and awards using the WBL framework sit within school or faculty subject structures or in a centralised, dedicated WBL section – or both? Different institutions adopt different models, but it is generally found that some degree of central leadership and oversight is valuable. The WBL framework might belong to the whole institution and any programme may adopt one of its modules; for example, on experiential learning, if appropriate. However, in these circumstances, advice and support from the team of WBL specialists may be found beneficial by other departments offering these modules.

How may academic coherence be achieved within negotiated WBL programmes? What is the balance between subject discipline focus and WBL modules? How does the overall profile of modules undertaken relate to the named award? A large proportion of generic WBL modules, as against subject-focused modules, in programmes of study could be seen by some to raise issues of academic coherence.

One issue relates to the coherence of the WBL experience over a long time, with regard to learners who would like to get transcripts and to notch up credit as they go along. Credit accumulation can be facilitated by starting with small chunks of credit and building up to awards. However, this approach, which is an effective way of engaging new learners and thereby widening participation, could be viewed by some institutions as fragmented and lacking coherence. This highlights tensions and raises the question, 'Are we facilitating a flexible process for accrediting learning, which allows for changes as individuals develop and evolve, or should we at the beginning identify key areas for a person's development needs to give a sense of overall coherence?' These key areas may not be specific at the outset, as in some cases individuals may be looking at a very broad field; conversely, they might start by being very specific in the first instance, and then broaden out as their studies progress. With regard to coherence, it can be argued that there is an analogy with research programmes. Research changes shape and nature over the course of its development, so these programmes may actually be thought to have more intellectual rigour; this applies to research programmes at any level. In such studies, coherence can be defined less by an existing academic discipline, than by the learner for their own needs and interests, which may be transdisciplinary.

Through a WBL framework, a university can award a degree in 'studies in... whatever the student works in', whereby the coherence of the degree is defined purely in relation to the job they are doing and the relevance of the learning to the workplace. The award title would reflect the approved studies in the negotiated programme, perhaps with an indication in the title that the studies have focused on work-based learning. This is one reason why many institutions that have been successful in scaling up WBL have a specific framework in order to meet the needs of both employers and institutions. Interestingly, it has been found that this can also then lead universities into considerably more flexible frameworks for other provision.

Accreditation of prior learning [APL] and accreditation of prior (experiential) learning [AP(E)L]

A WBL framework can also provide a flexible means of giving academic recognition to higher level work-based learning gained by an individual outside the university, through accreditation of prior learning and of prior experiential learning.

A good, clear system is needed. Some institutions have centralised, some decentralised, processes for accrediting prior and experiential learning. The percentage of the award that can be accredited in this way also varies between institutions, with examples being: two-thirds; half; variations according to level; and up to all but the last 60 credits.

AP(E)L systems may distinguish between 'general' and 'specific' credit. At one institution, where a learner may AP(E)L up to two-thirds of an award, the AP(E)L process with regard to WBL does not involve specifying the learning outcomes that have to be demonstrated; rather, an equivalence of general credit against the level descriptors is acceptable because the focus is on the individual's prior learning, and not on the institution's programme content. This approach contrasts with more subject- or discipline-based requirements that may apply in professional programmes. In health and social care, for example, a specific map of outcomes that have to be matched is needed if a licence to practise is involved. Some professional associations may also have a requirement of a specified number of hours for a continuing professional development [CPD] award, which may affect the scope to give credit in recognition of prior learning or experience.

Issues can also arise for learners who may be disappointed to find that academic credit from a previous award is not necessarily transferable; for example, from an HND or HNC to a foundation degree. It has been found beneficial to have processes in place in order to demonstrate both the recent currency of the prior learning and its coherence within the proposed negotiated programme.

The nature of the pre-validated modules within a WBL framework means that they may easily be used to map out AP(E)L claims, particularly if flexible experiential learning 'templates' are available. A significant aspect of WBL concerns how students are supported through such processes. In doing AP(E)L at one institution, it has been found that a good stimulus for learners is that of looking through units on a database and trawling, with guidance, through areas that might be relevant. This sensitises learners to academic level and to what a curriculum might look like, and involves asking, 'What do you know? What would you tell someone taking over your job?' At this particular institution it has been found that, where students on foundation degrees have been asked to start with tick-box checklists of competence, they find this boring; however, they do enjoy being asked, 'What do you know about the theory relevant to your work and practice?' They can be shown examples of the type of syllabus they can cover, including professional values, and then asked to create their own syllabus. This is one type of process that institutions may wish to put in place to create effective work-based learning; the issue may be less about frameworks than about how to ensure that there are processes to get students to engage with the potential of WBL.

The roots of the flexible WBL approach perhaps lie closer to the adult education tradition of self-planned or informal experiential learning outside institutions, where the 'subject' or 'content' is defined by the individual or the context (Tough, 1976; Coffield, 2000). Institutions tend to claim that traditional university students should be independent, but in practice there is often little scope for autonomy regarding what they study and how they are assessed.

However, the structure of the WBL framework can ensure that there is an emphasis on individual process and reflection within the programme as the primary means of capturing and awarding credit for experiential learning. This individual engagement can be seen as an enactment of a higher level academic process, helping to articulate the questions that learners need to put to themselves and facilitating their demonstration of learning outcomes recognised at HE level. In this sense, there are similarities with the pedagogic concept of research supervision. The approach is very different, although potentially complementary, to that often taken in the practice elements associated with professional education including, for example, work placements and the undertaking of work-related projects or assignments in order to meet professionally defined standards and requirements.

Elements of commonality in the use of WBL frameworks for individual learners include a process of negotiation of the territory of enquiry at the outset, leading to a learning agreement or contract, and also the necessity for understanding and recognition of level. As has been discussed, this involves at an early point a needs analysis undertaken by the learner with support from a tutor in higher education, and key modules can be included that prepare the learner to undertake a negotiated programme.

There may be no fixed order of study of modules or units. Some frameworks always start programmes with self-review, as this introduces the way of learning and enacts the view of how WBL takes place. This may assume that there are particular underpinning WBL skills that learners must have before they embark on WBL programmes. A self-review module at the outset (using processes by which the learners go through their job descriptions, draw out skills, and identify what knowledge they have) can be important in engaging new learners. This is about introducing reflective practice, capturing and understanding what and how they have already learnt by interrogating themselves and asking, 'What do I know?' and 'How did I come to know this?' (Brodie and Irving, 2007). This process engages people in the processes of work-based learning and develops an understanding of the theory underpinning the approach.

Early self-review can also be helpful diagnostically and can provide the individual material that drives the process of negotiating the elements to be in the learning programme. This is one way of setting the overall coherence of a programme, but

need not necessarily be introduced through a module positioned at the start. In other cases, the framework may allow learners to start by finding out about something specific, which may have a knowledge base either within the academic institution or in the workplace; awareness of self can then come into the package later. There are, therefore, benefits to including a self-review module at some point, if only to pull the studies all together and integrate the learning. An honours degree, for example, has to be more than just 360 disparate 'crumbs' of credit, but its coherence will depend upon the individual and how they can justify this in relation to their professional development, rather than through an externally predetermined set of modules.

However it is designed, the structure of a framework itself provides the means of ensuring that an element which is characteristic of reflective, experiential learning is built into all WBL programmes. The link between the pedagogic model and how learning is assessed can be strengthened by consistent use of level descriptors translated into assessment criteria and marking criteria reflecting generic work-based learning outcomes.

Conclusion

It can therefore be seen that there is a range of characteristics and associated processes that are distinctive to many work-based learning frameworks. This represents a common principle the implementation of which may be locally varied. Different institutions may design and use their frameworks differently to reflect their own organisational principles, practices and cultures. However, most institutions currently engaging actively in work-based learning and the promotion of workforce development have found it beneficial to validate and use a specialised framework, incorporating all or some of these characteristics, as a flexible and responsive means of designing customised higher level programmes of learning both for employers and for individuals. A framework can give structure, coherence and identity to a work-based learning award, while building in pedagogic approaches that can underpin effective learning in and through the workplace.

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