

The Tri-partite Relationship between Higher Education, Employers and Learners for Academic Qualifications through Work Based Learning (WBL)

Abstract

We describe the main aspects of a 330,000 euro Erasmus project whose aim is to produce a more effective way of improving the skills of employees through academic work based awards that involve a tri-partite relationship between Employer, Learner and HEI. Prior to the project we had already been working with employers to design and deliver work-based learning programs in partnership with higher education. However there was a need to theorise our intuitive knowledge and practical experience.

By conducting extensive research into the three dimensions, the project sought to gain a deep understanding of the issues, incentives and barriers, to produce evidence for the relevance and viability of the tri-partite approach, and to make recommendations on improving knowledge and confidence in WBL qualifications by linking employer strategic objectives and staff development to academic curriculum.

The research methods involved primary research using questionnaires, interviews and case studies, supported by literature reviews.

Outline

Work-based learning

The underlying approach for the project (Project number 510022) embodies characteristics of work-based learning programmes identified by Boud *et al.* (2001). These include:

- Partnership between external organisation and education institution
- Learners involved are employees of the external organisation
- The programme followed is driven by the requirements of the employer and the learners rather than the education institution
- The starting point and educational level is established after learners have engaged in a process of recognition of current competencies
- Learning projects are undertaken in the workplace

Employer Views of Work Based Learning

The aim is to build on our work with employers in the UK to develop a deeper and Europe-wide understanding of Employer needs and contextual issues in workforce development. This will provide the basis for understanding the needs and aspirations of employers and how work based learning can match this. Our work has shown that employers very often have well developed strategies for development of their employees. These programmes are often formal, usually with direction from the HR department, but they can also be informal, and undocumented. In either case, it is essential that employers can observe the performance of their employees, and can measure the effectiveness of

performance improvement programmes. If educational programmes are to align with employer needs, it is essential that they understand the employer perspective regarding work force development. This work package has involved working with different types of employers (Corporate and SMEs), across national boundaries (Italy, Poland, Latvia, Denmark, UK) and within different business areas (Business, computing, technical) and with topical EU drivers (economic, demographic, political).

Investigating the Learner View of Work Based Learning

The success of a company will be influenced by the capabilities of its people. The aim of this workpackage is to build on our research in the UK to develop a deeper and Europe-wide understanding of learner needs and aspirations. Integrating this knowledge with other workpackages we can come to a coherent understanding of the tri-partite relationship between learner, employer and HEI. Effective collaboration between these three partners is a very real aspiration if the EU is to exploit the full potential of its population and maintain healthy economic conditions. Most organisations have strategies for development of their employees, sometimes formal, with direction from the HR department, sometimes informal, and undocumented. In either case, employees are used to having their performance observed, and appraised. If HEIs are to design and deliver effective collaborations with industry, it is essential that they understand how performance measurement can be used to promote work force development. Each partner will contribute to this package, working with different types of employees (students, graduate trainees, permanent employees), across national boundaries (Italy, Poland, Latvia, Denmark, UK), within different business areas (business, computing, tourism) and with topical economic drivers (economic, demographic, political).

University Culture and Academic Issues

The aim of this work package is to investigate and communicate the issues affecting Universities and their interaction with employers and WBL. It is accepted that there is a cultural gap between the worlds of academia and industry. Universities can see themselves as set apart from the commercial pressures that industry is accustomed to, and they can consider that their interaction is best kept to the theoretical context and research. However there is much to be gained from a closer collaboration between Universities and Industry, and especially the engagement of Universities in WBL. For example:

- Transfer of knowledge, innovation and expertise from Academia to Industry and *vice versa*
- Workforce development through academic programmes leading to improvements in productivity and performance to make more efficient and sustainable EU economic conditions
- Universities adapting to changing demographic profiles and economic conditions within the EU

In the main Universities have offered WBL 'courses' which are traditional in terms of content and delivery, with little or no recognition of the tri-partite relationship between learner, employer and HEI. Employers have criticised academia for not adapting to their needs, and being inflexible in their approach.

Before a more enlightened approach can be encouraged it is essential to explore the issues, which concern academic institutions.

Findings

Our presentation will include a discussion of the findings from the completed work packages of this EU funded project. These findings will be of interest to HE strategic leaders and educational policy makers.

References

BOUD D, SOLOMON, N & SYMES (2001), *New Practices for New Times*, in *Work-based Learning: A New Higher Education* eds David Boud & Nicky Soloman, SHRE and OU Press, UK.

Key words

Education, Work based Learning, HE reform, Widening participation, Education and Employability