

Three's a crowd - Does including an employer in the learning relationship affect learner freedom (0187)

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ABSTRACT

The traditional learning relationship exists between two parties: the learner and the learning institution. Work-based learning is unique in that it brings a third actor, the learner's employer, into the relationship. This study will examine the ways in which introducing an employer (third actor) affects learners' engagement with their education, focusing on their perceptions of freedom, control, agency, value, ownership, and choice within their studies. The study draws from several areas of Higher Education Research – learner engagement theory and its applications to programme design, the nature of the learning relationship between HEIs and mature students, and the relatively new field of work-based learning at HE level – and will utilise student voices from both work-based learning and more traditional HE studies to make progress in designing and implementing work-based learning in ways that are effective and engaging, meeting the needs of students as well as HEIs and employers.

AIMS

The primary aim of the project is to determine the similarities and differences that exist in the perceptions held by HE students enrolled in traditional FT/PT programmes versus those enrolled in work-based learning (WBL) programmes as relate to their feelings of freedom, control, agency, value, ownership, and choice. 'Freedom' is defined as the student's belief that he/she can take actions within his/her education without undue negative consequences. 'Control' is defined as the student's perception that he/she has the ability to make or change decisions regarding education, or take action within education. 'Agency' is defined as a student's belief that he/she is responsible for his/her education and the results he/she achieves. 'Value' is defined as the worth a student sees in his/her education. 'Ownership' is defined as the student's belief that the learning, knowledge, and achievements of his/her education belong to himself/herself. 'Choice' will be narrowly understood to be a student's determination of the programme of study he/she is pursuing. All other elements that might be considered 'choice' will instead be examined under the heading of 'freedom,' above. While each of these is significantly influenced by many factors beyond/outside the student, the primary interest of this paper is on the students' perceptions and feelings as relate to these concepts, rather than uncovering a measurable or empirical degree of each. It is crucial to have a clear and well-informed understanding of the differences between students participating in HE through different learning programmes in order to ensure that all students across programmes are provided with the same opportunities to be engaged through HE. The project will also help to inform the way in which WBL providers work alongside employers to ensure that they are engaged in the learning process without causing learners to perceive their educational opportunities differently than those students enrolled in traditional FT and PT HE learning. The project has the potential to enhance the delivery of

learning to a variety of different groups, both those in WBL programmes and those in traditional HE programmes.

BACKGROUND

While WBL is frequently described as a 'tripartite relationship between the HEI, the employer and the employee' (Basit et. al., 2015), to date the bulk of research on the subject has focused on designing and delivering educational programmes that meet the needs of HEIs themselves to have closer ties to industry, of employers to have more fully and effectively trained and engaged staff, and of the shifting Western economic system, that values more highly skilled workforces (as described most effectively by Hogeforster and Priedulena, 2014). While the opinions and perceived outcomes of employee-learners are beginning to be collected in a growing body of research, some take the form of case studies of specific programmes (see Wareing, 2014 and Wareing, Chadwick, and Baggs, 2014) while others focus on assessing the pedagogy of WBL programmes (Siebert, 2012; Lester and Costley, 2010). It is the intention of this study to drive the analysis of WBL further forward by examining the ways in which students of WBL perceive freedom, control, agency, value, ownership, and choice, making use of elements of Student Involvement Theory (Astin, 1999) as well as further analyses conducted by Lewis et. al. (2015) and Kahu (2013) to analyse results.

METHODS

The research will utilise a combination of quantitative analysis of Likert Scale and checklist questionnaire responses and qualitative analysis of both short-answer questionnaire responses and a limited number of semi-structured interviews. Participants will be drawn from two distinct groups within the Faculty of Business and Management at University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD): students engaged in HE through traditional university enrolment and students engaged in HE through work-based learning. Students will be asked via email to participate by completing a short questionnaire that seeks to provide categorisations for analysis (including age, gender, subjects studied, personal background, etc.) and to determine the students' perceptions and opinions on a variety of statements that relate to their feelings of freedom, control, agency, value, ownership, and choice within the context of their education. Students who elect to do so will be contacted for an in-person, semi-structured interview to further analyse their feelings and perceptions, and to gain clarity regarding their responses where necessary/appropriate. The information collected via the questionnaires and interviews will then be analysed to search for trends that may indicate a unique, shared perception among specific groups (i.e. work-based learners, female traditional HE learners, traditional HE learners over 30, work-based learners under 25, work-based learners who are sole traders) as relates to freedom, control, agency, value, ownership, or choice within their education. Quotations taken from interviews will be used to contextualise and enhance the information gathered from the trends identified through the surveys. These findings will then be analysed to determine whether recommendations for improvement can be made for work-based or traditional HE learning.

EXPECTED RESULTS

It is hypothesised, based upon results from previous examinations of mature students (Stevenson, 2013; Reay, Ball, and David, 2002; van Rhijn et. al., 2016; Buckley, 2014) that the results may indicate an inclination for mature students (those aged 25 and older) to

possess stronger feelings of freedom, control, agency, value, ownership, and choice. It is not yet known, however, what effect being a student of WBL rather than a traditionally-enrolled HE student may have. It is hypothesised that the inclusion of an employer will reduce these positive feelings, however it is not known whether this will be borne out by research or is simply anecdotal and whether its effect on participants will be weaker or stronger than the effect of being a mature student.

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