The reality of employer engagement in work-based learning

Mary Crossan, Anne-Marie McTavish and Vida Bayley

Strategy and Management Department, Faculty of Business, Environment and Society, Coventry University

"Work-based learning is focused around change – changing individual effectiveness in their workplace. It is an aim that students will be better at their job having been through the WBL course."

(L. Bird, Head of the WBL Unit at Coventry University, personal communication, 2009)

This paper considers the relationships between the three main stakeholders involved in a student/employee form of work-based learning (WBL) in the higher education (HE) sector: the higher education institute (HEI), the learner, and the employer. We define WBL in this paper as referring to employees studying in an academic setting but having their studies directly related to their role within an organisation. The precise focus is on the expectations that employers have with regard to their level of engagement in the learning process. The paper provides an insider's critical reflection on this tripartite relationship from the personal perspective of a learner and offers some tentative insights into it.

Background

MacClaren and Marshall (1998), Goodwin and Forsyth (2000), Gray (2001) and Boud and Solomon (2001) are among many who advocate that in order for WBL to be effective, there needs to be open three-way communication between learners, academic institutions and employers in order to increase the likelihood that all parties have a positive learning experience or outcome (see Figure 1). Boud & Solomon (2001), Gray (2001), Williams (2006) and Smith and Preece (2009) all contextualise WBL in broader perspectives.

Although this is the accepted wisdom, there are critics. Gleeson and Keep (2004) question the required level of employer engagement. Both Hanney (2005) and Hillier (2006) separately argue that in reality there is less employer involvement in the tripartite relationship.

Government policy interventions, for example through the Leitch review of skills (2006), focused on WBL as a way of improving or enhancing employability skills or career prospects of students on these programmes. Evidence of the HE sector's response to these proposals is the wide range of work-based programmes currently in place and in partnership with employer organisations. For example, the pioneering work of ACUA Ltd, a subsidiary of Coventry University with Government funding, shows commitment to employer engagement.

Figure 1: The idealistic view of a relationship in a WBL contract
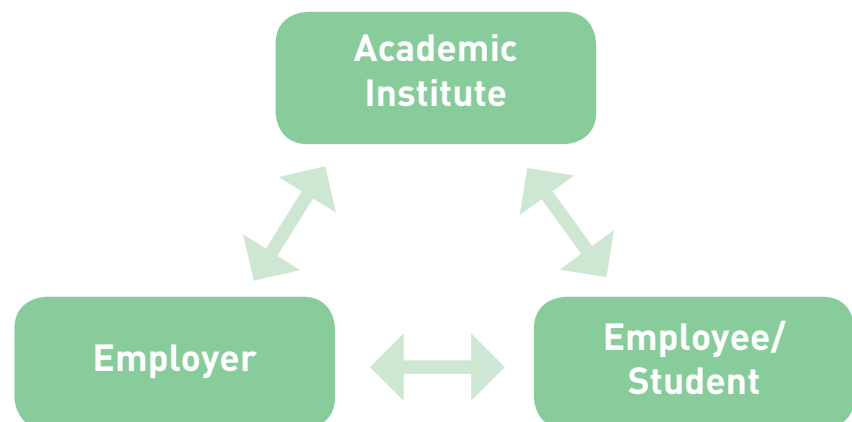
One perception within HEIs is that there are benefits that accrue to all stakeholders from WBL and that there is equal commitment, thereby creating stronger relationships between all parties which will not only improve learning, but also result in repeat business.

However, a more cynical view of work-based provision by HEIs is that it may simply be a way of helping employers feel that they have received value for money when sponsoring an employee to study. Whether or not this is the case, the outcomes from these programmes need to be evaluated in terms of the benefit that the business as well as the learner/employee receives. Employers may expect their employees to become better at their jobs as they acquire relevant skills, see the bigger picture and become able to contextualise issues from differing perspectives.

From an institutional perspective, WBL programmes can provide academics with the opportunity to challenge traditional teaching and learning methods in order to facilitate students in developing skills that span the academic/workplace boundaries. By merging both the professional and work elements together, they can foster a new and emergent type of employer-focused learning.

Students have the opportunity of learning in familiar environments, and being able to apply a practical approach to assignments, literature and theory. To initiate and then more quickly cement a buy-in, mutual agreement of company-focused project proposals is based on triangulation between the three stakeholders, with the aim of increased motivation for engagement.

Reflections on WBL

As a student who completed an MA in Management through a WBL programme which was conducted through a blended approach to study from initial residential study to peer meetings and tutorship support, I (Mary Crossan) have developed an academic interest in this type of provision and the tripartite framework of collaboration and partnership. My reflections are based on my journey as a student, my subsequent investigation of the WBL approach, and my experiences of setting up WBL relationships as a learner.

My experience of the relationship between the learner and the academic institution was a positive one. The structure of the course and its assessment were such that the teaching was very much steeped in learning through reflections as an employee within a work-based setting. The course was configured with active peer sessions enabling learning through discourse with others at a similar level. We discovered that we

were experiencing similar issues at work and this became an integral part of the process of developing our understanding of the links between academic theory and discussion and the practice of our work-based activities. In discussions around this area I noted that the support of the student group on work-related issues was more beneficial than that of the manager or work colleagues, as the former were able to look at the issues from a more objective position outside a particular organisation and as a result had a clearer view of how to overcome or resolve a particular problem.

Conversely, my experience of the relationship between me as a learner and my employer was limited. Before the course began I discussed with my line manager the WBL curriculum and the management areas I might consider in my studies. Beyond this, there was no agreed 'continuous update' process nor scheduled meetings to gain an update of my development. From discussions with my student peers this seemed to be a situation that varied greatly. Some talked about similar experiences to mine, others found that their managers were keen to help the managerial in-company projects, and yet others were more deeply engaged owing to the business-critical nature of the learning tasks.

The relationship between the academic institution and the employer was similar in that it seemed less coherent and mutually beneficial than that between the learner and the academic institution. In the same way as the relationship between learner and employer, these relationships varied considerably. I noticed that when managers asked for updates and progress reports they were available and supplied. But few employers took this proactive approach towards their learners/employees. Most, as in my case, were more reactive with very little interaction or engagement between the parties.

From my experience and the research of student peers, I found there was very little direct interaction between the academic institution and the employer after the student's recruitment and induction. Once the course had started the majority of interaction was conducted through the learner. In particular, employers were not engaged in the learning process, including assessment. This prompts a concern raised by Norcini (2005) and Bird (2009), who cite a number of explanations of threats to the validity and reliability of academic assessment caused by lack of employer engagement in the process.

This was not a problem for me as my project did not rely on managerial input. Billett (2004) stresses that attention should be paid to the structures, norms, values and practices within workplaces. Interestingly

and rather surprisingly, many of my student peers thought that their own updates to managers were adequate and preferred them not being too heavily involved, as they were concerned about how this might impact on their careers. There seemed to be no structure or norms for employer/employee engagement on this, which may also affect the tripartite relationship.

Conclusion

My experience has led me to question whether the tripartite relationship that is often discussed in relation to WBL is realistic or even desirable. Is employer engagement required in equal proportion to that of the academic institution and the learner or can the relationship be more imbalanced than Figure 1 suggests? Would an imbalanced relationship be more or less effective? In considering this unevenness, I tentatively advance Figure 2, which captures the relationship that seems to exist between the three parties and which appeared to emerge implicitly, and although imbalanced, manages on the whole to operate adequately.
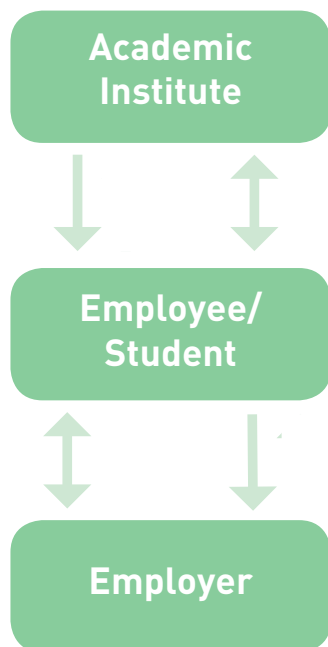
Figure 2: An empirical view of the tripartite relationship in a live WBL contract. This diagram indicates that information flows generally through the student/employee in the WBL contract

Why did my reflections on this experience generate a very different viewpoint from that commonly advocated in WBL?

There may be several possible explanations:

- From the academic institutions' perspective, their customer changes during the relationship. Initially the selling of the WBL product focuses on the employer. Once the course begins, the employer diminishes in the relationship and the intended 'end-users' (the employees) become the customer. Hanney (2005) expresses a similar view

- The course may be more attractive to time-constrained employers if much of the contact is directly between the students and the academic institution. In effect, the employers are commissioning a provider who is seen as an expert in delivering the course. Employers may see the relationship not as an equal partnership, but instead a customer-supplier relationship with the customer (the employer) only getting involved if they become dissatisfied

- The course structure was very student-focused, as too was the assessment throughout the MA, which in itself may limit employer contributions but aid student development as they may have more freedom and worry less about being open and honest during learning encounters.

Of course my perspective is likely to differ from that of others who have been through the same process; this is an individual reflection, of an insider. However, in my research activities related to WBL, I have had discussions with students, employers and other academics and these insights seem to be mirrored elsewhere. Employer contributions in WBL relationships are mainly limited to the set-up period and when problems occur. If these reflections prove accurate, they question whether the proposed equal partnership of the three bodies is idealised and misses some crucial practical constraints and concerns.

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