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2015-7

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# EXTENSIBILITY – VALIDATION OF WORKPLACE LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION – EXAMPLES AND CONSIDERATIONS

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## Abstract

The importance of effective curriculum design and development in structuring and supporting learners in their knowledge attainment has been outlined in the writings of Tyler (1949) [1] which supports the approach adopted in European Higher Education stemming from the 1999 Bologna Declaration (European Commission, 2009). These structures are assisted in part by national and European qualification frameworks and the Dublin descriptors which are explicit of the variances in knowledge, skill and competence as one progresses in higher education and training. In addition, the inclusion of learning outcomes and programme objectives in the development of comprehensive curricula has been linked to the product model of curriculum development.

Informal learning is defined as learning gained through in-house training, non-accredited courses where the outcomes is known in advance but there is no associated academic credit.

This paper outlines the approaches adopted by Cork Institute of Technology in considering informal learning from the workplace in curriculum design, development, delivery and assessment of academic programmes. This is considered in terms of recognising how learning happens and the structures which need to exist to build an effective system for the growth and development of incorporating workplace learning and future needs.

The paper includes a discussion around the necessary frameworks identified by Cork Institute of Technology which support the development of a more informed curriculum design quality assurance cycle. This cycle seeks to incorporate flexibility into the design to facilitate individual learning pathways and specialisations, whilst maintaining academic rigour, higher learning and workplace needs.

The approach adopted by CIT as outlined in this paper provides examples of how the incorporation of flexibility without compromising quality assurance in curriculum design and development can deliver outcomes more aligned to the needs of graduates and the workplace.

Keywords: Workplace learning, higher education, validation, accreditation, informal, experiential, learning.

## 1 LEARNING IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

In the past number of years there have been changes in approach at a national and international level as to how programs are devised, delivered and supported. There has been a significant shift in thinking on what learning is valued, coupled with where and how learning can be achieved. There is also an increased emphasis on professionalism within the enterprise domain and the need for on-going support for the acquisition of skills and competencies to ensure growth and sustainability within a changing and competitive global marketplace.

There has been a ‘paradigm shift in higher education, one from a focus on teaching, to a focus on learning’ (Barr & Tagg, 1995)[2]. There is a tension between the traditional academic approach and the newer demands of students to have an understanding of the application of their learning rather than knowledge alone. There is increasingly a demand for student-centred programmes which focus on developing the learners rather than solely delivering education and assessment.

In 2011, the Irish national strategy for Higher Education to 2030 (Department of Education and Skills, 2011)[3] identified 'higher education as a mechanism to make Ireland a country recognized for innovation, competitive enterprise and continued academic excellence.' Several areas were outlined which would require change and attention including;

- Engagement with the community
- Changes in teaching and learning
- Assessment
- Quality assurance systems

There is a growing acknowledgement that learning happens outside the traditional educational context at all levels and that the workplace itself provides an important context for learning. In Ireland, Cork Institute of Technology (CIT) has always valued its relationships with employers and has always developed courses in consultation with employers and employer groups. In more recent years, the importance of practitioner learning has become more valued by institutions such as CIT which has sought to include this practice and learning into formal academic programmes. This approach as a result considers the following;

- Learning can be intentional and unintentional.
- The workplace should be seen as a valid centre for learning.
- Learning relevant to academic programmes can be formal and experiential learning.
- Learning acquired prior to registering on an academic programme has value if applicable to the content of a programme.
- Planned learning activities can also include intended workplace activities which yields extensive learning.
- In devising a way forward one has to be mindful of all learners and that the approaches adopted are fair and equitable
- Consideration should be given to including the workplace and the employer at the programme design, development, implementation and assessment stages as they may be best placed as context within which the required knowledge can be generated and applied.
- Higher education institutions programme development teams should consider the mobility and transferability of the learning and the learners.

## **2 EXTERNAL ENGAGEMENT**

While engagement is often presented as a third mission of universities, encompassing the full range of external interactions with enterprises, individuals and communities, separate and distinct from the first two missions of teaching and research, it is only effective if it is closely interlinked with them. Vorley and Nelles(2008) [4] describe the third mission as a 'thread that has the capacity to weave together teaching and research, while assuming a more economic and societal focus'. Viewed in this way, engagement is not separate from education and research, but rather a new lens through which to view teaching and learning and research activities. Goddard [5] clearly articulates the dangers associated with disjointed approaches.

'Insofar as external engagement is taking place, the academic heartland is protected by specialist units dealing with technology transfer and continuing education. However the external engagement agenda... requires institutional responses, co-ordination and transversal mechanisms.' (Goddard 2005: 30)[5].

As a result of this there is an increased focus on educational institutions and how they need to change in terms of 'autonomy, collaboration, to become outward facing and fully accountable for quality and

efficiency outcomes. This demand was in part addressed through the Strategic Innovation Funding provided by the Higher Education Authority to transform higher education in Ireland.

The economic climate in Ireland has had an influence on how industries and organisations are engaging with training and development in terms of planning for the future and having a workforce capable of responding to market changes. Training and development units within companies are more conscious of spending budgets on activities which will have a relevance to the employee but also the organisation and organisational development goals.

The Higher Education Authority (HEA) in Ireland invested significant funding in the restructuring of higher education in Ireland in an attempt to make it more responsive to the economic changes and more dynamic in its educational offerings going forward. One such funded project was the Roadmap for Employer Academic Partnerships (REAP)[6] which built on the work of the Education in Employment (EIE)[7] project which collectively focused on the workplace as a centre for learning, the aligning of industry and higher education in the creation of more relevant and meaningful programmes.

Research conducted and reviewed by the Irish national consortiums of the Education in Employment (EIE) and Roadmap for Employer Academic Partnerships (REAP) project included the perspectives of eleven Irish Higher Education institutions and their collaborations with industry. The findings of the consortium centred on the relationship which should exist within a work-based learning arrangement. As graphically demonstrated in the diagram the Higher Education Institution, employer and employee all have an equal part to play in successful work-based learning engagements (Linehan, 2008). It is the inclusion of the requirements or motivations of each of the actors that lead to positive results as opposed to it being dominated by one.

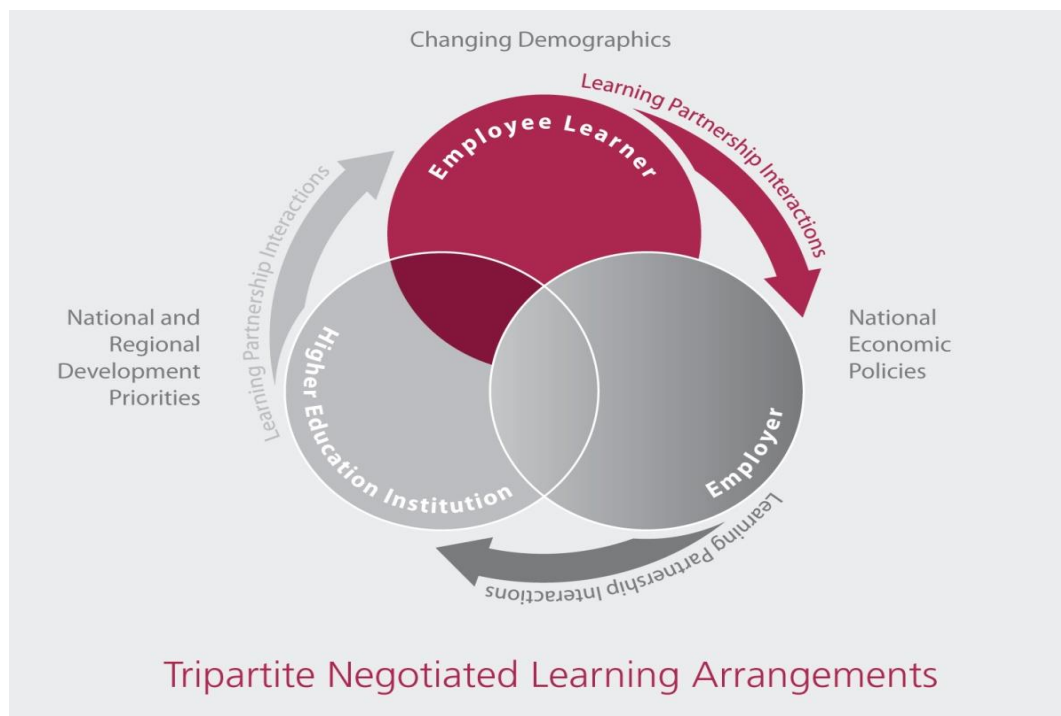


Fig. 1 Tripartite learning arrangement Customised Learning Development; An Exploration of Practice

### 3 MODELS OF PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT

In a review of practice in customised Learning developments to meet specific industry needs good practice guidelines were developed from an analysis of a number of different practice arrangements for the general stages in customised course development (Sheridan and Murphy, 2012)[6]. These stages which are outlined below are not indicative of a rigid process but provide a good general

approach which may be useful to those interested in course development in a response to workplace needs.

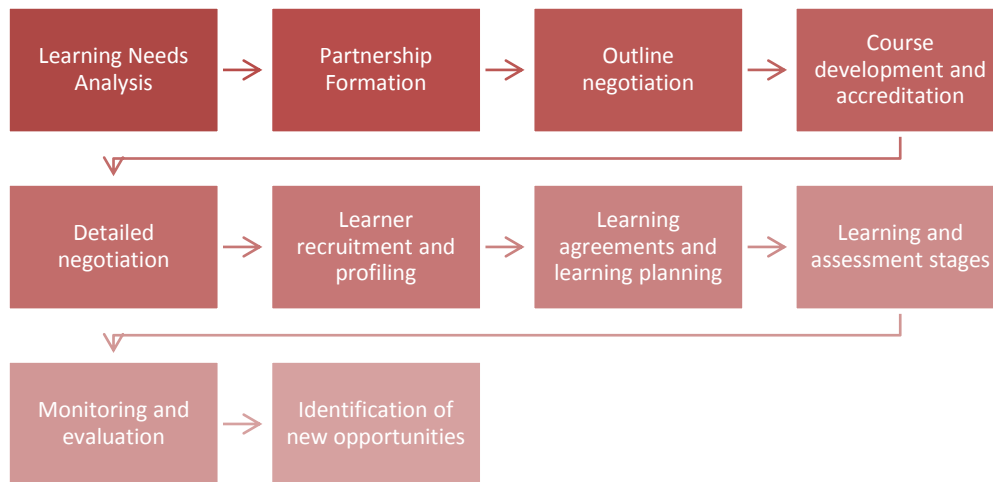


Fig. 2 Main Steps in Customised Course Development

The report also identified the following enablers for customised learning development programmes with industry [6];

- Existing relationship and good mutual understanding between the higher education institution and the company.
- Clear points of contact and commitment to the vision and the process from both sides.
- Clear decision structures in each organisation with regard to the development of a customised programme so that changes are clearly and easily implemented.
- Identifiable learning need to motivate both in developing an appropriate solution.
- Flexible approaches to learning and assessment.
- Availability of funding.
- Existing exemplars which show the potential of HEI employer engagements.

These factors, as outlined above, have informed the practice of CIT in its engagements with Industry. Recognition of prior learning policy and practice has existed within CIT since 1999 and applies to all courses in all disciplines and at all levels of the framework. In CIT, RPL can be used for entry, advanced entry, module exemption and full academic award based on prior informal and non-formal learning. As Institutes of Technology place significant emphasis on the development of programmes closely aligned to the needs of the workplace and with enterprise partners, the integration of workplace competences within higher education is very much within their remit.

Increased negotiation with workplaces to keep pace with enterprise changes and challenges which will have an impact on graduate skill requirements in the future is also a factor of which HEIs have to be mindful, however the challenge is in striking the balance between education and industry priorities. These priorities can be achieved through strategic partnerships to develop customised learning pathways that are sensitive both to the learner profile and existing skill set and are informed by the unfolding organisational needs.

In considering how learning that is gained in non-formal and informal settings is to be assessed we need to consider how the learning outcomes and programme outcomes have been written and whether this is sensitive to the variety of contexts in which the learning might be achieved. We need to be confident that the assessment and validation processes are such as to assure the quality and level of the learning and that the learning appropriate to credit on the national qualifications framework.

A model which can assist in this process is a circular one which encourages periodic review and reflection on ensuring that the content of programmes and modules facilitate learning from different contexts.

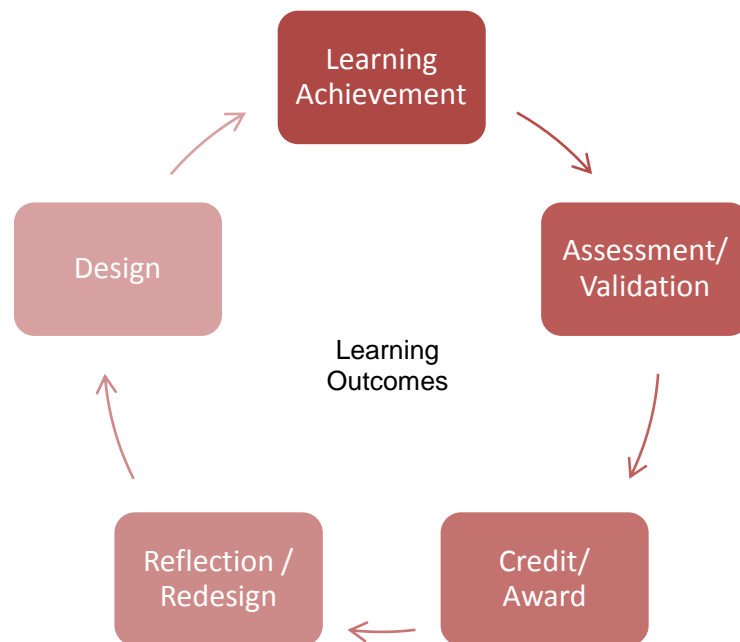


Fig. 3 Circular Relationship of module review process

To demonstrate the variation in programme development the experiences of Cork Institute of Technology will be discussed in the context of two different workplace engagements incorporating the validation of prior learning in a response to an industry need whilst maintaining academic standards.

#### 4 LEARNING PATHWAYS

To design the most appropriate way forward through the development of context sensitive learning pathways it is necessary to have an understanding of the learner or cohorts of learners. It is at this stage that it is appropriate to consider the prior learning of the individual including the knowledge, skills and competence they have attained and can evidence regardless of the contexts within which it was attained. The intention is that the subsequent learning process should seek to build builds on and not repeat these.

The partnership process with the employer includes the identification of an appropriate destination award. If the learning is to be considered solely in the context of achievement and evidencing workplace competencies then there may be no place for collaboration with a higher education provider. Other factors such as the transferable value to the learner, a changing business model or new professional regulation requirements can influence the focus on particular qualification and up skilling requirements.

The two preceding steps have been focused on knowing who the learner is and where they are heading. The final step and possibly the most important if the outcome is to be fully realised is to agree on how the learner is going to get there. This phase in the process includes agreement on the learning pathway which can incorporate subject matter experts from the workplace in the delivery of the programme and work based learning which can ensure that where appropriate, some of the learning can be attained and evidenced at and through work.



Fig. 4 learning pathways for workplace learners

In the Irish context, the question to be asked is ‘what is the motivation for the attainment of higher education credit mapped to the framework’. In addressing this question for the learner it places a value on the learning they have achieved in the workplace and its validity beyond the workplace setting. It also facilitates the learner within the context of mobility and transferability of the learner and learning.

There is also benefit for the employer in terms of valuing the employee, raising the profile of the company as a learning organisation which can contribute to attracting and retaining talent.

## 5 EXAMPLES FROM PRACTICE

The following examples are intended to illustrate a variety of situations wherein non-formal and informal situated learning which happens within the workplace setting is assessed and validated as part of higher education awards.

### 5.1 Work placement in Third Level Programmes

CIT, in common with most third-level providers, has built work-placement (sometimes referred to as Internship or Co-op) into many of its courses. This provides undergraduates with the opportunity to apply their learning within the practice domain and to gain skills, competences and know-how which can be very difficult, or indeed impossible to gain in a theoretical setting.

This practice is not without its challenges. In the past many providers organised placement without much consideration of the kind of learning that should be gained, the comparability of the context within which the learning could be gained and often with very little associated credit or assessment on a pass or fail basis.

In many cases this was due to the complexity foreseen in the assessment of learning which would happen in a variety of contexts and lack of confidence in the ability to design and assess learning outcomes in this variability of contexts and experiences. All could agree on the value of the experience and on the fact significant learning could be gained, but in higher education there was a hesitance about the capacity or capability to judge or measure this learning. This practice has evolved considerably, sharing of scholarship and expertise has contributed to the development of confidence in this form of learning and placement learning is generally planned through carefully designed learning outcomes. The employer is considered an active partner in this planning process and the learning is evidenced through a variety of means including but not limited to: learning journal, reflective practice, critiques, presentations, seminars, debates, reports. Assessment then is based on this variety of evidence as well as company visits and employer feedback.

Our experience has been that Higher Education staff can be somewhat reluctant to apply significant credit to the work placement despite their view of its value as they are not entirely comfortable with their ability to assess and they are also reluctant to give a role to employers in the assessment of the learning.

Clearly stated learning outcomes and rubrics for assessment can help to overcome some of this reluctance. It is important to have robust quality process and confidence in this learning as it has

growing importance in Higher Education in Ireland with most higher education providers predicting an increase in the numbers of courses which will include an experiential placement.

## 5.2 Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Practice

This programme was developed in a response to a number of National challenges, the development was through a collaboration of the Departments of Education and Skills, Jobs Enterprise and Innovation, Social Protection, American Chambers of Commerce in Ireland, several large employer organisations, several higher education institutions and the Higher Education Authority.

The companies identified the difficulty in getting approval for increased headcount in a challenging economic environment and the tendency to focus on seeking experienced employees, which resulted in recognised difficulty for graduates in getting that first step on the employment ladder. Through their contribution to the development of a pool of experienced graduates, the intention is to support multinational corporations in leveraging additional work for their Irish subsidiaries by being able to demonstrate access to a pool of qualified and experienced graduates.

The programme was designed as a predominantly work-based one which presented a significant challenge for the higher education institutions. The challenge for the institutions was in defining and supporting learning acquisition in addition to managing the assessment and validation of that learning within the workplace context. There was the additional challenge for the higher education institutions in having confidence that masters' level learning was achievable and could be evidenced within a workplace context.

The programme consisted of three modules namely;

- Personal Development and Employability
- Organisation Context
- Specialist Module

These modules required a significant level of self-directed learning by the graduates. Training and support of workplace mentors was provided by CIT before the commencement of the programme and through-out the programme as required. The graduates were required to identify and record key learning and key learning events throughout their internship within the company. In addition to this record they were also required to collate and present evidence to support these key learning events. The key learning events had to be considered in the context of the defined learning outcomes of the programme modules. The intention of the programme was that the graduates were reflecting on the learning they had prior to entering the internship from the academic perspective and how this translated into the practice domain. The higher level learning of reflection and reflective processes underpinned the programme.



### WHERE TO LEARN? HOW TO ASSESS?

In the construction of academic programmes a system of learning and programmes outcomes are promoted as being the optimum method of structuring intended learning of a programme. This is very much in keeping with the Bucharest communique in relation to the consolidation of the EHEA. 'The development, understanding and practical use of learning outcomes is crucial to the success of ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, recognition, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance - all of which are interdependent.' (EHEA, 2012)[8]

In considering learning achieved in the workplace through the lens of approved learning outcomes and programme outcomes mapped to credit on a national framework, the learning is made visible and has a value and currency beyond the immediate workplace setting. From the learner's perspective they have a reference point which facilitates their access, transfer and progression beyond the current



programme of study. The employer, through the national framework of qualifications, also has a formal indicator as to the academic level of learning which an individual has achieved.

## **CONSIDERATIONS**

In higher education there can be a tendency to view learning which has been attained in contexts other than within the traditional 'classroom' setting with suspicion. The co-creation of knowledge in collaboration with enterprise/ workplace partners presents a significant challenge for higher education in the design and implementation phases.

Work-based learning could be considered as a disruptive force in education as it challenges the idea of the knowledge master and his apprentice within a traditional academic environment. It also causes higher education to consider how confidence, capacity and capability for work-based learning can be developed, in addition to ensuring that assessment methods used are valid, authentic and fair. These considerations tend to impact not only for the work-based learner but also the traditional learner.

Further considerations include the question of the assessment methods used to capture learning in the workplace and how these compare with or inform those used within a more traditional classroom setting. A further consideration for a learner is whether the value of the learning will be recognised by an academic institution or another employer and whether all parties have confidence in the system in the learning, support and assessment processes. These considerations occur at a time when higher education is experiencing a paradigm shift in how learning can be achieved and re-considering how we assess for learning.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The inclusion of work place requirements in terms of the validation of prior learning presents opportunities for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and employers. The challenge is in identifying, designing and managing an engagement to satisfy the needs of the employer, employee and Higher Education Institution.

The experience of CIT is that it is possible to have a coherent, credible approach and the reliable inclusion of experiential and work-based learning into education pathways which lead to a higher education award. This is in part assisted through the development of a system of learning outcomes which considers the attainment of learning regardless of the setting.

In order to effectively assess work-based learning it is necessary to consider methods and assessment instruments which are more attuned to 'non classroom' learning. This is to ensure that the method used is more suited to the identification and gathering of informal and non formal learning.

In conclusion, Higher education and enterprise engagements have the potential to deliver significant benefits for institutions, organisations and learners. The range of possible interactions can span a considerable variety of activities. In working to support these activities it is important to stress that the relationships that underpin these interactions are complex and that both parties need to be prepared to work closely together to explore the need and to commit resources to the collaboration. Having realistic expectations about what can be achieved and a willingness to work toward common goals sets the scene for positive interactions but generally in the context of long term relationships. The examples provided herein illustrate how higher education institutions and external organisations can collaborate to achieve flexible, accessible learning pathways which are sensitive to the learner needs as well as the organisation/employer needs.

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