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Author(s): Jon Talbot ; Dilys T Leonard

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## **'Islands in the stream' – causeways or compromise?**

**Dilys T. Leonard and Dr. Jon Talbot**

**University of Chester**

In recent years, policy drivers have given a strategic push towards encouraging 'employer-led' work based learning in Higher Education. For example, Leitch ( 2006?) and other key policy makers advocate institutional change and reform in HE to respond to market needs; HEFCE encourages HEI's "Towards a strategy for work based learning"; the QAA has reflected most recently on 'employer-responsive provision'. This paper sets out to explore the impact of these strategic objectives and some issues which emerge from the rapprochement of stakeholders and providers. It is based on experience in an institution where challenges and tensions are being met and overcome. The case example is part of a Higher Level Skills Pathway (HLSP) Project whose lead partner is the North West Universities Association (NWUA) in North West England. Learning Pathway provision for Housing Practitioners (via a Professional Certificate in Leadership) has been developed in conjunction with employers using the WBIS (Work based and Integrative Studies) framework at the University of Chester. This flexible modular framework puts knowledge and experiential learning gained in the work context at the core of learning activity.

This paper uses the example to characterise the power relationships and tensions. Reflecting on the case study, it seems that by attending to such policy drivers, much compromise is required from both parties in terms of curriculum design and the relationships being built between Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) and employers. The term 'employer-led' denotes an uneven power relationship and this may in the long run serve to undermine the hallmark of HE provision – quality and standards.

In conclusion we suggest that the whole relationship needs to be predicated on co-produced provision in order to build sustainable relationships between employers and HEI's. The term 'co-production' equalises the power relationship, encouraging the goal of dynamic

interaction, mutual respect and benefits based on the expertise and knowledge of each party.

### **Attending to the Policy Drivers**

It is clear in the past twenty years that the field of 'learning' and the world of work are converging and that there are 'better connections' between work and educational institutions resulting in the notion of 'fusing' learning and work. ( Matthew and Candy ). This is reflected in policy reports which aim to drive this convergence: HEFCE (2006) published a report entitled "Towards a strategy for workplace learning" where it states: *"There has been a significant shift in the nature of the relationships with employers; the university is no longer the senior partner in the arrangement, it is an equal partnership"*. However Boud and Garrick (1999) identified early on in this rapprochement that *"The divide between individualistic, enterprise –focused and socially focused conceptions, has ..created misunderstandings between.. employers on the one hand and ..academics on the other"*. P.6

More recently, (February 2010) the QAA's reflective report: 'Employer-responsive provision survey' highlights tension between the requirements of the employer and those of the institution. It is helpful that policy makers recognise that often compromise is needed and engagement with employers is not straightforward or easy.

### **Context: work based learning and reflective practice at Chester**

The University of Chester has been engaged in work based learning (WBL) since 1998. The value of Work Based Learning (WBL) is to help people adapt to change, work in a changing environment, improve their thinking and analytical skills to deal with highly complex problems. Its main activity in this respect is the use of a 'shell' framework, the Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) programme to deliver flexible learning to adults in employment. There are many theoretical foundations for the underpinning philosophy embedded in WBIS but perhaps the best summary of its principles is contained in Brookfield (1998). The framework has currently has just over a thousand learners at Levels 4-8, mostly studying individually negotiated pathways and award titles. In common with many other UK HEI's, Chester uses a modular framework; single modules are 20 credit rated (10 CITS).

The WBIS programme is a 'shell' framework. This enables academic tutors to tailor learning to the needs of the individual or group of

learners. Some pathways, such as those for housing practitioners, are constructed with specific groups of learners in mind. A distinctive feature of the WBIS approach is the intimate connection with workplace practice. In a typical WBIS module, the learner is introduced to a body of theory and wider literature and then asked to interrogate their own practice. Learners select those theories /models which are relevant to their own needs and use this as a basis for producing academic work based on the notion of reflection on experiential learning in the workplace. Learners are encouraged to reflect on their current practice as a means of improving performance. As Raelin ( 2008) states: “ Work based learning then differs from conventional education in that it involves conscious reflection on actual experience”. In this way, WBIS attempts to bridge the divide between knowledge located in higher education and that in ‘real life’, specifically the workplace, so that both are informed by one another. This innovative approach to learning has ‘come of age’ having recently been commended by the QAA 2010 (Institutional Review Report March 2010) highlighting the “effectiveness of the WBIS programme in providing flexible responsive and relevant educational opportunities to work based learners” Para 29 page 85. To summarise, the WBIS Framework at the University of Chester is explicitly designed to facilitate improved performance in the workplace. Individual pathways of learning are constructed for all levels of learning in the context of Higher Education. WBIS ultimately seeks to transform individuals in organisations. In the next section, this paper reflects on a practical example of how the WBIS framework has been used to design and deliver a Professional Certificate in Leadership at Undergraduate Level 4 in collaboration with a Registered Social Landlord and it explores issues which have arisen as a result.

### **Context: Housing Sector and Current educational provision**

Housing organisations have undergone major business changes due to political and socio-economic factors in the past twenty years. Recent years have been marked by a strong shift towards private tenure and private rental housing. However, since the global financial crisis in 2008 there has been a dramatic swing back to increased demand for provision of affordable and rental homes. Social Housing continues to evolve into a more complex and diverse landscape and there continues to be a need for more skilled and professional management and leadership practices in Local Authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSL’s) in the UK. Providers can see the link between good people management and improved organisational performance and service delivery, even in the light of deficit cuts.

This situation is confirmed by the Chartered Institute of Housing for Scotland (2009) that “ *..there is a need for organisations to ensure they move from more traditional styles of management to people centred management practices for employee development and customer service*”.

At present the pattern of provision in terms of University level accredited education for Housing professionals is a well defined route of studying on a day release basis to gain qualifications such as the HNC in Housing Studies. The current provision of education pathways for Housing practitioners has not been flexible enough to meet the needs of housing organisations where the pressures to allow a weekly day-release mode of participation for staff has been detrimental to operating their business. Employers restrict the numbers of employees being released each year to study in this way because of staffing levels and operational requirements. Nonetheless employers still require staff to function effectively and efficiently in terms of leadership and management practices in an increasingly complex, highly audited housing sector. Research undertaken by Asset Skills carried out in 2006/2007 found that employers did not feel that HE/FE course provision reflected learning needs or trends in Housing and there was demand for more effective employer engagement, to develop bespoke and flexible courses. It also highlighted a shortage of suitably qualified and experienced Housing Managers.

The Professional Development Unit (Centre for Work Related Studies) at the University of Chester became aware in 2007 that there was scope for developing flexible specialist pathways using the WBIS Framework for Housing practitioners. The opportunity arose to secure developmental funding from the North West Universities Association via HEFCE and the North West Regional Development Agency (NWRDA). We became involved with the Higher Level Skills Pathway (HLSP) Project whose lead partner is the North West Universities Association (NWUA). This has led to liaison with a consortium of regional Housing employers as a basis of developing and delivering accredited tailored learning pathways for Housing practitioners to improve access to accredited Housing education.

## **Quality and the role of HE and WBL**

Our experience in this case study highlighted tensions between the requirements of the employer and those of the HE institution, at the boundary where we set out to design curriculum and build sustainable relationships with employers. It is reassuring that this issue is also

recognised by the QAA – their reflective report (2010) on a survey on employer – responsive provision suggests that: *“where provision is developed for and in conjunction with a particular employer this may be termed employer responsive provision”*. In addition they state that this sort of engagement between HEI’s and businesses *“can be considered as more complex and potentially present different challenges compared to more traditional provision.”* We now consider why this be the case.

The cultures of universities and businesses are diverse in nature. Usher (2000) cited in Smith and Chepelin ? states that

*“working through organisational layers of politics and power relations, academics struggle to reconstruct the boundaries and maintain the standards and ...allow flexibility in the content and processes of WBL”*.

Usher concludes that in order to develop WBL, practice needs to centre on the *“co-production of knowledge”..and the university needs to get used to production of knowledge outside the academy”*. Ten years on, these ‘boundaries’ which Usher refers to are now even more blurred and academic practitioners in WBL need to be mindful of their position and approach regarding quality and standards – those elements that will not be compromised.

It might also be useful for WBL academic practitioners to consider Gibbs and Armsby’s (2010) suggestion that the power base has shifted and the *“direction of quality... moving it away from the hegemony of the academy in to the pragmatism of the marketplace.”* They too acknowledge the ‘fault lines’ between “education and the power of the workplace” and that nothing will be achieved if either party merge “its values into the others.” They advise that institutions should either “engage fully” or retreat from Work Based Learning activities. We agree with Gibbs and Armsby’s (2010) assertion that *“academic and industrial values are incommensurable and that it is only with mutual respect that collaboration can be fruitful”*.

### **‘Co-production’ and ‘knowledge brokers’.**

How might HEI’s attend to the strategic policy drivers to collaborate more with employers whilst upholding quality and standards of knowledge and learning? Our experience from the case study prompts us to propose that the terms ‘employer led’ and ‘employer responsive’ do not help to develop sustainable relationships between academic institutions and employers. The language used suggests a dominant partner – the employer. It suggests a primacy for employers even to the extent that academics can be challenged on their area of expertise

e.g. curriculum design, assessment and quality issues. This is perhaps understandable when value created by industry for economic growth and profit is more highly considered than value offered by academics i.e. knowledge production. In order to equalise relations we propose approaching accreditation and curriculum design activities between HEI's and employers (as described in the case study) using the notion of 'co-production' to guide our activities.

The idea of 'co-production' is well known in social services etc field of.... Blah blah Boyle et al (2006) state that " It has emerged as a general description of the process whereby clients work alongside professionals as partners in the delivery of services."

The term denotes dynamic interaction, mutual respect and benefits to both parties. Needham and Carr (2009) state that "*co-production is a potentially transformative way of thinking about power, resources, partnership, risks and outcomes.*" It emphasises the importance of dialogue, negotiation and restructuring of relationships and empowerment of both parties.

Bettencourt et al (date) identify similar challenges to those identified in the case study occurring in management consultancy firms. They state that :" *Knowledge intensive business service firms whose clients play a critical role in helping them to co-create or 'co-produce' the knowledge based service solution ... (EDS, McKinsey, Accenture).. face unique challenges in managing the collaborative role and contributions of the clients.*" They recommend that the best approach pays attention to communication, negotiation and openness.

In a co-produced environment the role of work based learning tutors/academics teams and departments may be considered as the 'knowledge brokers' i.e. those who use their academic expertise to facilitate knowledge production in the workplace. Their role is to legitimise the creation of this new knowledge and certify it in terms of volume of academic credit.

## **Conclusion**

As a result of this case study, the authors suggest that the idea of a WBL Tutor's role of 'knowledge broker' is different and distinct from their role in the traditional sense of an academic who is a 'knowledge provider'. By using flexible frameworks such as WBIS, we do not consider ourselves to be concerned so much with 'content delivery' as with 'knowledge brokerage.' By this we mean facilitating WBL and the creation of new ( mode 2) ?? knowledge by employees in the workplace. We therefore suggest that practitioners such as ourselves

in WBL may find it useful to weave the ideas of having an identity as 'knowledge brokers' concerned with 'co-production' of knowledge alongside employers. By adopting such an approach from the outset, we can construct a causeway between universities and employers which will act as a firm foundation for developing mutually beneficial relationships.

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