

## **The challenge of work based learning: a role for academic mentors?**

**Purpose** - This paper explores the key challenge(s) experienced by employers, employees and academics during work based learning (WBL) programmes at undergraduate level. The idea of academic mentors is proposed as an aid to addressing the challenges common to WBL programmes.

**Design Methodology** – The case study presented in this paper involves a large multinational organisation and a higher education institution (HEI), both of which are based in Ireland. Interviews were used to explore the outcome(s) of a WBL programme.

**Findings** – The challenges associated with WBL place demands on the design and delivery of curriculum, pedagogy and accreditation. The use of academic mentors can help translate academic knowledge into workplace practice; and address challenges which are common in WBL programmes.

**Practical Implications** – The understanding of best practice in the design of WBL programmes is enriched. A role for academics as mentors is identified and the implications explored.

**Originality/value** - The success of WBL can be linked to the relationships that form between employers, employees and academics. There is evidence that the academic is central to the development of these relationships.

**Keywords** mentoring, academic mentors, work based learning, case study

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

In Ireland the creation of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) resulted in many government policies and strategies specifying the requirement to align higher education curricula and academic activity with the changing needs of industry (EGFSN, 2010; HEA, 2011). The development of WBL programmes and mentoring schemes is driven by a combination of: government policy; initiatives from higher education institutions (HEIs); and the needs of employers. WBL represents a significant departure from the traditional emphasis of higher education. Although mentoring is not a new idea in a business setting, the mentoring of employees by academics is a relatively new and untested development. The importance of WBL as a means for facilitating the transfer of academic knowledge into meaningful career development in the workplace is well documented in the academic literature (Brennan, 2005; Costley and Armsby, 2007; Nixon, 2008; and Major, 2011). The perceptions of employers have been studied (Benefer, 2007); as has the experience of academics (Linehan and Sheridan, 2009); and employees (Liyanage *et al.*, 2013; Tate and Thompson, 1994). This paper examines the three perspectives of employers, academics and employees simultaneously but with a focus on the potential role of academic mentors. This approach facilitates a three way narrative based on a case study of a WBL programme in Ireland. The result is multiple perspectives on the purpose, process, benefits and challenges of WBL. The involvement of academic mentors is proposed as an aid to addressing the challenges common to WBL programmes.

## **Mapping academic knowledge to workplace activity**

Linehan and Sheridan (2009) reflect that in Ireland, until recently, provision in higher education was almost entirely designed to offer *for-employment* rather than *in-employment* education and training. *In-employment* training has, for the most part, been largely disconnected from the formal education qualifications system. Initiatives to up-skill the labour force pose significant challenges. According to Forfás (2012), there is a need to realise the full potential of the Irish workforce and this requires a flexible education and training system. Indeed the talent problems of employers, employees, and broader society are intertwined (Cappelli, 2008). With competition for traditional learners intense, many HEIs are focusing their attention on those in employment. Murphy (2007) suggests that partnerships between HEIs and the world of work are not entirely new. Traditional and contemporary arrangements for the training of professional practitioners in areas such as law, information technology, accountancy and in the pharmaceutical industry have been in existence for some time. Employers want skills delivered at a cost they can afford and often at short notice. Simultaneously employees want initiatives that offer genuine prospects for career progression.

Gherardi (2006 and 2009) explains that society is dominated by a view of professional learning, education and training based on a notion of learning as a process of information delivery from a knowledge source to a target lacking that information. Typically, the source of knowledge is an academic. Traditionally, academics have used work based examples to provide evidence that the theories, concepts and models from their subject area provide value when analyzing real world situations. However, Ghoshal (2005) proposes that theories often fail to represent the reality in the workplace. The reason is that in many cases ethics, organisational culture and

character traits have been excluded from theory building despite the obvious impact on workplace practices. Ardley (2008) explains that the inconsistent definition of academic principles often results in inconsistencies in their application and a misunderstanding by companies of the purpose, process and benefits of academic techniques. Furthermore, Stephens *et al.* (2010) propose that although theory is useful in describing workplace activities, employees are often oblivious to the role theory plays in their actions. Therefore, the professional learner based on their experience in the workplace will often challenge the validity of academic knowledge. This issue emerges as a key inhibitor to the WBL of the employees in this case study. The employees are resistant to having their actions framed by academic principles that seldom allow for: time, interpersonal relationships, organisational structures, organisational culture and other internal workplace factors.

### **The challenges of work based learning**

Sobiechowska and Maisch (2006, p. 270) define WBL as:

*A programme of study where learners are simultaneously full-time employees whose programme of study is embedded in the workplace.*

The aim of WBL programmes is to simultaneously meet the learning needs of employees and the needs of their employer. Boud and Solomon (2001) explain that WBL programmes typically have six characteristics: a partnership between an external organisation and a HEI; learners who are employed in an external organisation; a learning programme derived from the needs of the employers and their employees; learners engaged in a process of recognition of their current knowledge, skills and competencies; learning that takes place as an integrated part of tasks completed in the workplace; and learning that is assessed by a HEI. Rowley (2005) and

Rosenberg (2012) suggest that WBL requires individuals and organisations to direct considerable effort towards agreeing a shared agenda. Furthermore, both parties must be committed to contribute over the lifetime of the relationship. Gallagher and Reeve (2005) suggest that WBL partnerships, in attempting to bring together employers and HEIs, run the risk of failure due to cultural disparities. Employers and employees may be *turned off* or simply baffled by the jargon of learning and skills. However, employers may be convinced of the value of WBL by the addition of an academic mentor. The academic mentor would support employees beyond the initial delivery of academic material. HEIs with recent or concurrent industrial experience have a clear advantage in bridging the gap between academic and working knowledge (Anderson and Hemsworth, 2005). In addition, organisations that have experience of running mentoring initiatives will be able to quickly adapt to the needs of WBL and offer support in an effective manner throughout the duration of the programme.

Writing from the perspective of organisational learning, Raelin (2008) identifies three critical elements in WBL: first, learning is acquired in the midst of action and often aligned to the task at hand. Therefore, the theory presented by academics must be aligned to current work activity and the design of assessment(s) must capture this activity as it relates to the theory. Second, knowledge creation and utilization are collective activities. Employees must be encouraged to be “reflective practitioners” with evidence reported to employers and presented in the assessments. Third, learners must demonstrate a *learning to learn* attitude, which frees them to question the underlying assumptions of practice. Employees must use academic knowledge to challenge workplace practice and visa-versa. WBL is based on the cycle of experience in performing work; taking action; and reflecting on emergent learning. Eraut (2000) explains that

the academic approach to work is based on formal, intentionally planned activities and the outcomes are often predictable. Hager (2004), however, explains that WBL is often unplanned and implicit; frequently collaborative; highly contextualized; and often has unintended outcomes.

Learners don't want to study what they have already learned, or study content which is packaged in artificial silos of disciplinary knowledge, they want to have content that directly relates to their work, and assessments that involve applied projects (Costley and Armsby, 2007). Boud and Symes (2000); Avis (2010); and Manjuand and Mampilly (2012) report many instances where WBL challenges academic identity. Murphy (2007) proposes that academics can feel threatened when their capacity to add value is challenged by learners whose command of the knowledge environment of work is much greater. As a result of all these factors designing and delivering a curriculum for WBL is challenging for academic practitioners accustomed to the traditional mode of teaching and learning. The result is that academics who are involved in WBL typically advise, mentor, coach and supervise rather than *teach*. The benefits of WBL can be mapped to the benefits of mentoring proposed by Scandura *et al.* (1996), Stewart and Knowles (2003), and Sobiechowska and Maisch (2006).

### **Prerequisites for work based learning**

A review of the literature (Brennan, 2005; Costley and Armsby, 2007; Raelin, 2008; Linehan and Sheridan, 2009; Emelo, 2011; and White, 2012) identifies six prerequisites for a successful WBL partnership:

1. the WBL programme should be jointly developed by the HEI and the employer;
2. continuous communication between the employers, employees and academics;
3. full commitment from the employers, employees and academics;
4. cultural barriers need to be identified and overcome;
5. the employee must be supported by both the HEI and the employer; and
6. flexibility of delivery and assessment.

An employer's primary motivation for participating in a WBL programme is the expectation of a positive impact on productivity and performance. Employees participating in WBL need support from the employer, particularly in terms of the time allocated to attend class and to complete assignments. Employees may lack study skills and academic writing may prove challenging. FDF (2007) identified a key component in WBL partnerships: academics who are enthusiastic and flexible HEIs must provide appropriate, qualified and capable academics who have sufficient time to facilitate WBL. Academics must move beyond the confines of traditional perceptions of WBL. There is a need for academics to engage with employees one-to-one and to mentor them in the application of academic knowledge. The role of the academic is crucial in helping the employee capture the value of their WBL and the value to the employer. Therefore, arguably learners should be allocated academic mentors. The role of the academic mentor would be to help employees to identify their individual learning needs and help them apply academic knowledge to practice. An academic mentor would supplement the standard delivery of WBL with one-to-one meetings. The academic mentor would help the employee to frame their workplace experience using academic knowledge. The outcome should be an improved

understanding of the interface between academia and the workplace for both the academic and the employee.

### **Challenges, Mentoring and Work Based Learning**

Scandura *et al.* (1996); Sobiechowska and Maisch (2006); and Rekha and Ganesh (2012) suggest that mentoring offers mixed results for an organisation. Attendance, active participation and assessment completion are cited as the main areas of difficulty for employees. A difference in the expectations of employers and academics is also commonly cited as a significant issue when assessing the need for WBL and the outcomes of WBL. Klasen and Clutterbuck (2004) argue that often substantial amounts of the content delivered in WBL will be forgotten by the time the employee leaves the classroom and that the majority will be forgotten within a month. Although authors including Poulsen (2006) and White (2012) have written about best practice in mentoring there is limited debate in the literature about the potential role for academic mentors in a business setting. This paper proposes that the addition of academic mentors can help bridge the delivery of academic material through the ongoing process of *situated learning*. The term *situated learning* was coined by Lave and Wenger (1991) to describe how learning can occur in what they call *communities of practice*. Karalis (2011) explains that situated learning provides a clear perspective on how learning occurs in social conditions and interactions. Indeed Honey and Mumford (2006) propose that formal classroom learning may appeal more to the theorist or reflector but may not engage the activist or pragmatist for whom mentoring may be the missing link. This paper proposes that shifting the delivery of education from the traditional higher education setting into the workplace and the responsibility for learning to the individual cannot be embraced without addressing the need for academic mentors.



Mentoring is an important source of development for individuals at every career stage (both *for-employment* and *in-employment*). Indeed successful organisations in a variety of industries are now emphasising mentoring as a key component of lifelong learning. Taking this a step further, this paper proposes that since WBL and in-employment education and training are now viewed as an integral component of lifelong learning there should be a link between mentoring and WBL. Changes in education and the emphasis on applied assessment are major contributors to the development of WBL and mentoring programmes. Indeed Stewart and Knowles (2003) highlight the value and importance of learning through work and the significant role that can be played in the process by mentoring. Workplace mentoring linked to WBL requires a partnership commitment that involves time, energy, and resources. As with all initiatives, workplace mentoring requires planning, training, monitoring, and assessment to ensure that the individuals being mentored achieve success, and that the mentors develop and improve their approach. Poulsen (2006) explains that the UK model of mentoring proposes that the mentor must have relevant experience which is valuable to the mentee and that the mentee must take responsibility for his/her own learning.

## **Methodology**

The case study method has been widely used in business and education as a research instrument for data collection, theory building and the development of best practice principles (Eisenhardt, 1989; Lewis, 2001; and Yin, 2009). This research employs an individual case study methodology. The case study presented in this paper involves a large multinational organisation and a HEI, both of which are based in Ireland. In line with Foley (2008) and Stephens (2013), a

snowball sampling method was used to identify respondents. A total of twenty eight individuals who have worked together and who have experience of WBL partnerships were approached to participate in this study. Eighteen agreed. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with six employers; six employees: and six academics. Exploring the three perspectives simultaneously facilitates a three way narrative based on the case study. The result is eighteen perspectives on the purpose, process, benefits and challenges of WBL, specifically the role of academic mentors. At the time of the interviews the academics were not designated as formal mentors.

Following a review of the literature interviews were conducted exploring the following themes: the nature of the WBL partnership; the prerequisites for WBL; the changing nature of WBL; the mapping of academic knowledge to workplace activity; and the role of academic mentors. Using qualitative data helps to improve our understanding of WBL in a number of ways: highlighting progress at an individual level; showing stakeholders what progress is being made; evaluating the roles of stakeholders; and assessing support from the stakeholders for WBL. Consideration of these *softer* outcomes provides a valuable context for stakeholders' needs and progress, rendering a truer, more rounded picture of outcomes (Stephens and Onofrei, 2012). The interviews were taped and transcribed, and superfluous material such as digressions and repetitions was removed to assist the analysis. Narrative structuring (Kvale, 2006) was used to encourage the interviewees to recount their experiences as freely and unguided as possible. This approach enables interviewees to provide highly contextualized and relevant accounts of the case study. The narrative presented in the findings section provides an account of the nature of the WBL programme. The findings are presented in six sub-sections: trust;

organisational culture; communication; partnership; delivery and assessment. The potential role of academics as mentors is addressed in the conclusion.

## **Findings**

The findings suggest that employers primarily want a WBL partnership that: offers value for money; causes minimum disruption to work schedules; and improves performance. For the partnership to succeed the employer must be committed in terms of: planning; support for mentoring; providing time off; and engaging with the academics.

**Trust** - like many partnerships, performance and success are largely influenced by the level of trust between the partners. These findings are in line with previous research (Gallacher and Reeve, 2005; Benefer, 2007; and Wedgewood, 2008). The additional contribution of the academics acting as mentors has the potential to build trust and assure the employer that the academic is making a meaningful contribution. All the respondents mentioned the importance of trust:

*If a WBL partnership is to be successful then it is essential that the parties involved trust each other ... this also means that the partners have full confidence in each other. Colleges often suspect that the employer is only concerned with profits whereas the employer often assumes HEIs put too much emphasis on the theory aspects of training (Respondent B – academic).*

The employers suggest that the level of trust between the partners in a WBL programme is affected by the motives each partner has for engaging in the partnership (Linehan and Sheridan, 2009; and Sobiechnowska and Maisch, 2006). If the employer believes that the main reason the HEI is engaging in the WBL partnership is for financial gain, then the employer will tend to have less trust and respect for that HEI.

**Organisational culture** - Cultural differences were reported by all the interviewees. An appreciation of the difference between culture in industry and in higher education is vital if a WBL partnership programme is to be successful. The exchange of cultural values can be facilitated by the one-on-one nature of the relationship between an academic mentor and the employees. It is also important to consider the specific cultural differences that exist between the partners. The employers believe that the HEIs should ensure that the academics responsible for delivering modules on the programme have a good insight into the culture, functions and workings of the host employer. The academic by working one-to-one with employees will better understand the nuances of the work environment and the organisational culture. Therefore, academics should be encouraged to regularly visit the organisation and see how the organisation operates. Being able to compromise is vital:

*Overcoming the cultural differences between private industry and HEIs is a major challenge. Both partners need to be understanding and realise that for the partnership to work, each partner is going to have to be patient. There will have to be compromises on both sides. The ability to overcome the cultural differences will depend a lot on the personalities of the partner representatives (Respondent E – academic).*

Academics should be aware of the tasks an employee is expected to carry out during and upon completion of the WBL programme. Assigning academics as mentors significantly expands the role academics play in the success of the WBL programme but also in the development of employees. The respondents in this case study suggest that HEIs predominately focus their efforts on education while employers seem to be more concerned with training. If the HEI can bridge this gap then there is a much greater likelihood of ensuring a successful WBL programme (Gallacher and Reeve, 2005; and Sobiechowska and Maisch, 2006). According to a number of

the respondents, when academics have recent, relevant, work experience and when employer representatives are familiar with higher education, then there is an increased likelihood that cultural differences can be overcome. Where this is not the case then the building of relationships between the academics and the employees is imperative.

**Communication** - all the respondents emphasised the importance of communication. Ideally all decisions relating to the development and delivery of the WBL programme should be made in collaboration, as the following quotes outlines:

*There needs to be regular feedback sessions between all the stakeholders. There also needs to be a learner representative appointed whose responsibility it is to voice the opinions and concerns of the learners on the programme. The need for this is especially important during the initial stages of the WBL partnership as there are usually teething problems at the start. The dates for these feedback sessions should be identified at the commencement of the programme otherwise the meetings probably will not happen (Respondent F – employer).*

Furthermore, the importance of communication was emphasised by all the respondents:

*Due to the unique nature of WBL partnerships, and the diverse needs of the different stakeholders involved, a steering group should be established to oversee the programme. There should be regular meetings organised where the progress of the programme can be discussed. The steering group should comprise learners, academic mentors and employers (Respondent D – academic).*

Academic mentors working directly with employees can help to improve the flow and timing of feedback between stakeholders. The result is a system of informal communication which supplements and complements the formal system of meetings and shared documents. Furthermore, respondents suggest that communications between the employer and the HEI should not just be confined to issues relating to the WBL programme. For example, employers could invite academics to corporate events. Similarly, the HEI should promote the employer as

a good place to work for their graduates. Acting as mentors means that the academics will be much closer to the reality of work in the organisation. This allows them to accurately publicise the work of the employer.

**Partnership** - if the WBL partnership is to succeed, both the HEI and the employer must invest significant time and effort in planning the programme:

*A roadmap should be created, outlining the key roles and responsibilities for all parties. This plan should also include the objectives the programme seeks to achieve. If possible deadlines should be built into the plan (Respondent A – employer).*

Both the employers and the academics stressed the importance of collaboration in programme design. Specifically, the academics should work to link programme outcomes to work-based actions. As mentors the academics can closely scrutinize how their academic toolkit is being applied in the workplace. This will facilitate the identification of problems and successes. This information can feed into programme design and delivery. Interestingly, a number of respondents (particularly academic respondents) believe that initially the partners should collaborate on smaller programmes as opposed to programmes comprising a large number of modules. The view was outlined by respondent B:

*Providers or departments new to WBL programmes should initially engage in shorter WBL programmes, for example programmes with two to three modules as opposed to trying to deliver an eight to ten module programme. The learning achieved from delivering a short WBL programme can then be applied when delivering the larger WBL programme (Respondent B – academic).*

One of the employers expressed the concern that HEIs often try to develop a generic programme which they then make available to all employers:

*From an employer's perspective, it is very important that the programme offered by the college is sector specific. Employers are not interested in a "one hat fits all" approach. They need to feel that the programme is tailored to their individual needs in terms of programme development, delivery and assessment (Respondent C – employer).*

**Delivery** - the use of academic mentors helps to customize and personalize the delivery of WBL and helps to assure employers that the programme has specific value to the organisation. The need for flexibility in terms of programme delivery was mentioned by the majority of respondents. Employers suggested that the times and dates of workshops and assessments may require amendment from time to time, especially at times when the organisation is particularly busy. On other occasions the employer may require the HEI to change the content of certain parts of a programme due to market changes or new legislation. Working with a HEI that can be flexible is very important to employers. This is a common theme in the literature (Ramage, 2003; Raelin, 2008; Wedgewood, 2008). Academics are able to reflect on the impact of their work and to amend the programme content to fit changing dynamics in the business environment and to adjust delivery/assessment schedules to facilitate changes in the workload of employees.

A number of academic respondents suggested that employees participating in WBL should be given adequate support in areas such as study skills, assignment completion, presentations, referencing and examination technique. These are areas where learners on WBL programmes are typically weak. A significant number of the employers and the academics emphasised the need to utilise virtual learning tools when delivering WBL programmes:

*Virtual learning platforms have the potential to revolutionise WBL programmes. In my opinion it is the single most important tool in such programmes. It allows the learner to learn at a time, place and pace most suitable to them. I have received very positive feedback from my learners, especially learners that are in full time employment (Respondent F - academic).*

The use of social media and on-line communication tools can help to create linkages both between the employees but also between the employees and the academics. Several employers stated that they require WBL programmes that cause minimum disruption to the employees' working day and that the use of e-learning tools can help ensure that the employee is not required to attend a substantial number of hours in class. Of course the remote nature of VLEs can make the employees feel separated from the HEIs and their academics. The use of academic mentors can assure that the employees can still feel connected (ask questions and have their queries addressed face-to-face).

Because learners are full time employees with family and social commitments they need to be made aware of the demands and expectations of WBL programmes otherwise it will be difficult to build relationships with their mentors:

*When an employer informs employees about the programme, typically a significant number wish to register. It is important that the employees interested in completing the programme are made fully aware of the demands involved. It is a good idea to have an information session which gives an honest account of what an employee should expect. If possible give employees that previously completed the programme an opportunity to offer their views to potential applicants (Respondent C - employer).*

A number of the academics believe that the employer should ensure that all employees on the WBL programme are suitable (see also Cappelli, 2008). Suitability should be determined by an



academic and employer representative interviewing all prospective learners, thereby, significantly increasing the likelihood of success. Furthermore, formal inductions often fail. The employees and employers seldom comprehend the extent of time and commitment required. Using academic mentors allows the HEIs to reinforce the requirements and expectations placed on employees during a WBL programme.

The respondents emphasised the importance of mentoring:

*Employees should be able to avail of mentoring support in addition to the delivery of academic material. The nature of these WBL programmes is that the academic is expected to deliver a lot of information in a fairly short space of time. Additional mentor support could contribute towards a successful programme (Respondent F – academic).*

A number of the respondents noted that if mentors are expected to provide support to learners, then they need to be allocated time by the HEI to provide this mentoring support:

*During the early stages of our WBL programme, I was made aware that the mentoring support service that was supposed to be offered to learners was not happening. When I investigated the cause of this, I discovered that mentors refused to offer any support unless they were allocated time off from their normal duties. (Respondent C – employer).*

**Assessment** - the assessment schedule and the nature of the assessment were highlighted as key factors affecting the success of WBL. One employer suggested that assessments should be linked to organisational objectives:

*WBL works best when the programme assessments are linked to what the learner is expected to do in the organisation. For example, if one of the modules is marketing, the learner could be expected to develop a marketing campaign for the organisation as part of the assessment. The learner should be able to discuss these links with their mentor. (Respondent D – employer).*

Assessments which map theory to the workplace were also received positively:

*The structure allows me to apply the theory I learn in lectures into my workplace, which makes it mutually beneficial for both my own academic development and also for my employer and our customers. Discussing the theory behind the practice with my mentor has also clarified the work I do and why I do it (Respondent I – employee).*

This alignment of assessments to workplace tasks can be achieved by the use of academic mentors, so helping academics to better understand how the assessments they design work in reality and how (if) their theoretical lenses help to understand workplace activity.

### **Conclusion: a role for academic mentors?**

This paper makes a contribution to scholarly debate on WBL programmes by providing insights from the three participant groups (employers, academics and employees). The success of WBL can be linked to the relationships that form between employers, employees and academics. There is evidence that the academic is central to the development of these relationships. By mentoring the employee the academic can build trust and assure the alignment of the employees' expectation with the delivery and outcomes of WBL. Furthermore, the additional insights gained through the mentoring relationship will better position the academic to engage with employers in the design and delivery of purposeful WBL. The challenges associated with WBL place demands on the design and delivery of curriculum, pedagogy and accreditation. Academic mentoring can be successfully incorporated into WBL programmes. The use of academic mentors can help translate academic knowledge into workplace practice. Successful academic mentoring involves non-traditional pedagogic approaches which help achieve a parity of esteem between academic and working knowledge. The use of academic mentors helps to foster a fully committed partnership which works to overcome cultural differences. This collaborative approach needs to permeate programme design, delivery and support. If the

partnership is to be successful there needs to be high levels of communication, commitment and trust between the HEI and the employer and their employees.

WBL involves balancing the often conflicting forces between working knowledge and academic knowledge and their respective organisational forms. WBL signposts the development of new orientations within the teaching and learning functions and also opportunities to develop new links and synergies based around learning and working knowledge. Adapting the steps in establishing a WBL plan identified by Brown (2001) this paper recommends that WBL involving academic mentors must include: (1) the establishment of a mentor recruitment plan; (2) eligibility screening for mentors (3) training for mentors and those to be mentored; (4) matching of mentors with employees; and (5) a monitoring process. Further research is needed to explore the experience of organisations of different sizes and in different sectors. Furthermore, WBL initiatives which pilot the role of academics as mentors need to be evaluated and the experiences of employers, employees and academics collected. This additional research would also help to separate the impact that mentoring has on procedural matters from the impact on relationship matters.

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