

INTRODUCTION

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What is this book about?

If you are new to work-based learning then this handbook has been devised specially with you in mind. Its chapters have been put together by work-based learning experts from different universities and organisations who have designed their input to guide you through the exciting, but challenging, experience of Higher Education (HE) level study which is based on your workplace and work expertise. Undertaking HE level study is a challenge for everyone but it can seem especially complex if you spend the majority of your time at work, with limited time for study, and little or no recent experience of formal education. There is no one universal model of work-based learning (WBL) but this handbook covers the key areas you will need to know about, no matter what WBL route you are taking. For example, you may gain an honours degree via a WBL programme (perhaps called Work-based Studies? Or similar) or you might be undertaking a much shorter award; the course might be delivered on a university campus, at your own place of work, online – or by some combination of these locations and methods. Whatever the details of your study – this handbook offers you an array of invaluable hints and tips to ensure that you maximise your experience. You can dip in and out of the book, retrieving what you need at any given point in your studies; don't feel that you need to read everything at once, or in a definitive order!

We want to help, support and inspire you, and this is reflected in the text's friendly, relaxed style. However, some of your academic assessments may require a more formal tone, and you may also find this formal tone adopted by other textbooks you use for your studies. We want you to enjoy your learning experience; to feel more confident after reading the book than you did before! Diverse examples of best practice appear throughout as case studies and examples. These are clearly signposted in grey boxes and illustrate for you the way in which real people benefit from engaging with HE level work-based learning. The students cited

show that it is possible to be employed, juggle personal commitments and flourish in a learning environment despite not attending university at 18, or undertaking 'A' levels. The examples are drawn from real student experiences, but care has been taken not to identify individual students. There are also numerous activities and exercises for you to try; tick-lists for you to use and lists of Top Tips. You will notice one of these coming up when you see its title or instructions in **bold**. These are designed to be useful, but fun, activities which will hopefully make some of the learning processes easier for you.

What is Work-based Learning (WBL)?

The information provided about WBL will help you to place your own experience in context; it will also help you to describe what you are doing to your line manager, colleagues, family and friends! Put simply, work-based learning is what is 'learned' by working – not reading about work, or observing work, but actually undertaking work activities. Whilst reading and research could well be involved, especially if you're aiming for a formal qualification, this is learning from *real* work and *real* life and accepting how inextricably linked those activities are. As the sophistication and level of your job increases, so does the likelihood that you will be undertaking research and studying theory.

Your "Work" may not be fulltime paid employment. Perhaps you are learning in a work placement, or as a volunteer? WBL involves many diverse students just like you, but they are all actively *doing* the things they're learning about (and actively learning from this doing!) You learn in your workplace and/or the classroom, further supported by electronic and mobile technologies. Increasingly communication between you, your tutors and your peers will be carried out online and your university or college will offer you introductory support and skills sessions to make sure you get the most out of these new and developing technologies (**Chapter 1** – HE skills; **Chapter 7** - online learning).

WBL commonly uses the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), a process which acknowledges learning from previous experience and/or qualifications. This reduces the

amount of time taken to obtain an award (**Chapter 2** - APL). As a work-based learning student you can gain credit towards your award through APL. This is especially empowering if you initially felt out of place and in a hurry at university. There need be no such thing as 'missing your chance'. You can also include continuing professional development (CPD) activity which you are carrying out at work already, in your WBL programme (**Chapter 3**).

As well as the unusual aspects of being a work-based learning student you will also benefit from the traditional advantages of HE - the development of intellectual, personal, critical and analytical skills, which will support and complement your practical skills and knowledge. You are likely to have much more life experience than an 18 year old student, furthermore you will probably find that your student peers in your class or study group differ widely in age, background and aspirations (this can even be the case when you are all from the same company!) However, as motivated, employed people prepared to work hard in order to successfully fit studying into already busy lives you will also have much in common. Because HE level work-based learning programmes take account of your existing knowledge and expertise they are the best, and certainly most time-effective, HE study route for you.

Let's summarise some of the key benefits of work-based learning

- Acknowledges skills & knowledge gained at work
- Maximises your time (1) – by offering APL credit and potentially advanced standing (**Chapter 2**)
- Maximises your time (2) - by assisting with workplace CPD and projects which you would have to do anyway (**Chapter 3** – CPD, **Chapter 5** - Projects)
- Combines education and development – for the 'real' world (**Chapter 8**)
- Offers Networking opportunities – your peers will all be employed too
- Links you into routes to various HE awards (**Chapter 8**)

AND, the key benefits of WBL study routes?

- Use your work role to provide/inform the curriculum
- Focus on your individual Learning Plan (Contract/Agreement) – (**Chapter 3**) some universities re-visit this each year
- Facilitate cross-disciplinary working, spanning subjects and sectors
- Actively accredit prior learning, both experiential and certificated (**Chapter 2**)
- Acknowledge that learning is taking place at diverse locations, not just in HEIs
- Offer flexibility re: time, place and style of study for example there may be off campus, out of hours and electronic options
- Allow longer (and looser) timeframes in which to complete awards
- Encourage negotiation of title, and content, of award (this differs between institutions)
- Keep compulsory modules and campus attendance to a minimum
- Offer generic skills modules – invaluable whatever your job
- Operate beyond the academic calendar, for example many recruit new starters and/or offer modules more than once a year
- Support reflective practice and self-analysis (**Chapter 1**)
- Offer innovative methods of learning, teaching and assessment (**Chapter 4**)
- Utilise technology, e-learning, distance learning (**Chapter 7**)

Graduates of these work-based studies programmes frequently state that they could never have undertaken HE level study, without the opportunity such a route has given them:

I could never have obtained my degree without a scheme like this. I left school with no qualifications and never felt like I could belong at university. The work-based studies programme proved me wrong! It is so flexible, it meant I could attend sessions and tutorials after work. I also completed a lot of the assignments at home, at work and in the library and based all of my major submissions on work tasks which I would have had to complete as part of my job, even if I wasn't studying (Student A)

They also offer an ideal progression route, if you already hold a Foundation degree (Fd) (**Chapter 8**), a small award; or some kind of professional qualification you can, potentially, accelerate to full honours degree status. The multiple step-on and step-off points characteristic of WBL programmes make this possible. Schemes often use a skeleton structure (see figure below) which can be 'fleshed out' in ways flexible enough to meet your individual requirements.

Figure 1 - PROGRAMME REQUIREMENTS: UNDERGRADUATE – AN EXAMPLE

Level 4 Core Modules	<i>Library & IT Skills</i> 10 credits	<i>Personal Development & Programme Planning (L4/5/6)</i> 20 credits	<u>Require 120 credits at each level!</u>
Level 5 Core Modules	<i>Research Methods (5/6)</i> 20 credits	<i>Personal Development & Programme Planning (L4/5/6)</i> 20 credits	<u>Some modules run at more than one level – to facilitate APL claims</u>
Level 6 (honours) Core Modules	<i>Continuous Professional Development</i> 20 credits	<i>Final Work Based Project or Dissertation</i> 40 credits	<u>Often modules run more than 1ce a year</u>

The remaining credits needed for your award might come from a combination of:

- APL claims
- Taught modules
- Skills modules
- W-B Projects
- Open Learning
- Independent Learning

What does a work-based learning student look like?

Student B is an employed process engineer who already had a Higher National Diploma in Mechanical and Electrical Engineering when she joined the work-based studies programme. She had obtained this within the previous five years. She joined the work-based studies programme at her local university when she found out that her HND could well be counted against a BSc in Engineering Studies. She obtained 120 credits at level 4 (120 required) and a further 50 credits at level 5 (120 required) for the precise content of her HND. She then gained further credits at level 5 for undertaking a core module where she learned about the process of claiming for prior learning (although this module itself carries only 20 credits, through its assessment process – a portfolio of evidence - she was able to claim a further 50 credits at level 5 for her experiential learning). This completed levels 4 and 5 (the equivalent of the first and second year of traditional undergraduate fulltime study). At level 6 she studied a taught module about continuing professional development (20 credits, evening attendance), undertook ‘Research Methods’ (20 credits, evening attendance), an engineering module (20 credits, day release) and two work-based projects, one worth 20 credits and one, worth 40. The 40 credit project, equivalent to a dissertation, involved developing a completely new process for her employer. This student was awarded a 2:1 classification for her BSc in just 2 years.

Why would YOU choose to study this way? WBL graduates have plenty to say:

Insufficient time to study fulltime?

(WBL) is an ideal solution if you can’t commit to full-time study but have the right experience. I’d tell anyone to go for it (IT trainer to primary school teacher)

Thinking of your next career move?

(T)he opportunity to obtain credits for prior learning and professional work-based experience was just the springboard I needed to encourage me to take the first step (...) The Business Management degree not only reflected my experience and career path as a professional police officer but will benefit me in being considered for other managerial roles outside policing (Police Inspector)

Want to accelerate your career in a limited time frame?

I was able to enhance my career prospects in my current position as a teaching assistant. I have always wanted to teach and am pleased that the (Work-based Studies programme) acknowledges my teaching experience and existing qualifications. I've been able to fast track myself. What should technically have been eight years of study has been reduced to three years. I've also been able to personalise my programme to suit my areas of interest, which is Special Educational Needs (Teaching Assistant to Teacher)

Would you benefit from presenting existing workplace projects in an academic format? (Chapter 5):

I wanted to do an engineering degree which gave me the opportunity to choose my own relevant modules. The (WBL route) allowed me to do this and, very importantly, claim credit for areas of major experience and learning. I was also able to transfer my previous qualifications into University credits, in effect, reducing my study time. Choosing specific modules to suit my current employment needs has been ideal. I'm a process engineer, responsible for the productivity and optimisation of manufacturing equipment. On this degree pathway I can now learn more about managing engineering projects and process improvements, as well as the standard technical modules more normally associated with an engineering degree (Engineer)

You can see from these quotations how varied the backgrounds and expertise of work-based learners are, the networking opportunities and shared practices you will gain from being part of a HE WBL community will really enrich your learning experience (**Chapter 6**). You are probably a 'mature' student, but please don't worry about this, being older than the traditional HE student really is NOT the hindrance new WB learners often presume it will be! You have a head-start on the wisdom and skills front, and experience of practical applications. Now is your chance to monopolise on all of this and connect some of your new educational goals to your professional and personal experience. You might feel that you need to make an extra effort to catch up on the theory and abstraction side of things, but don't give up! This is worth the effort, there is always more to learn but it really enhances your workplace practice. WB learning students tend to have a goal-orientated and structured approach (sound familiar?!) this attitude ensures that you will achieve great things through

your engagement with HE, not least because of your professional approach to being assessed (**Chapter 4**).

What's so good about HE anyway?

HE level learning carries credit. This is what makes it possible to offer you awards and qualifications; there is a system in place to track and quantify what you have learned, and furthermore to compare this learning to other learning which is of a similar level of difficulty and complexity. Credit is used in the HE sector as a portable, international 'currency'. Because HE level learning carried credit your study pathway is flexible, adaptable, valued, tailor-made and tied into a recognised quality system. The HE credit system recognises successful completion of modules, courses and programmes.

Why are you engaging with work-based learning? – a quick re-cap!

- **Bespoke** – designed around your needs
- **Relevant** - connects to your real workplace activities
- **Student focused** – the emphasis is on what you want/need to learn – not what someone else wants to teach you
- **Credit-bearing** – has a discernible worth attached, recognisable globally
- **Added value** - encompasses your work and life needs and interests – the qualification can feel like a bonus
- **Realistic** – in terms of flexible timescales and feasible expectations
- **Supported** – your employer will see the benefit and may support with mentorship, time off, assistance with fees? (ask your Line Manager)
- **High status** – HE award could bring promotion, pay rise, new job
- **Ongoing** – ties into progression and your continuous development
- **Enjoyable!** – it really can be! You have such an influence on the content
- **Cutting edge** – you learn, develop and use innovative, new practice
- **Different** – this is not run of the mill, it is largely what you make it

The following chart summarises where key subjects and activities which will be of interest to you are mostly dealt with in the following chapters:

Headline chapter content	Level 4 (1st Year equivalent)	Level 5 (2nd Year equivalent)	Level 6 (3rd Year equivalent)
Assessment	chapter 4	chapter 4	chapter 4
APL claims	chapter 2	chapter 2	chapter 2
HE Skills	chapter 1	-	-
WB Projects	-	chapter 5 & 6	chapter 5 & 6
Online Learning	chapter 7	chapter 7	chapter 7
Progression	-	chapter 8	-
Continuous Professional Development	-	-	chapter 3
Programme Planning	chapters 2 & 3	chapters 2 & 3	chapters 2 & 3
Learning Contract	chapter 3 & 6	chapter 3 & 6	chapter 6
Support Networks	chapters 6,7 & 8	chapters 6,7 & 8	chapters 6,7 & 8
CV & Job Description	chapters 2 & 3	chapters 2 & 3	chapters 2 & 3
HE Context	intro & chapter 1	intro & chapter 1	intro & chapter 1
Work Placements & Live Briefs	chapter 8	chapter 8	-
Industry Relevance	chapter 8	chapter 8	-
Research Methods	-	chapter 5	chapter 5
Reflection	chapters 1,2,3,4 & 6	chapter 1,2,3,4 & 6	chapter 1,2,3,4 & 6
Level Descriptors	chapters 1, 2 & 4	chapters 1, 2 & 4	chapters 1, 2 & 4
Accreditation Foundation degrees Progression	chapter 8	chapter 8	chapter 8
Feedback	chapters 4 & 6	chapters 4 & 6	chapters 4 & 6
Autonomous learning	chapters 1, 3 & 6	chapters 1, 3 & 6	Chapters 1, 3 & 6

Learning styles	chapter 3	chapter 3	chapter 3
PDP	chapter 3	chapter 3	chapter 3