

Work-based learning programmes in business and management in the UK: policy and practice

Paul Smith
University of Teesside

David Preece
University of Teesside

Successive British governments since the 1980s have advocated closer links between higher education and industry and this approach is examined through WBL programmes within higher education. The paper explores the current government strategy on higher education informed by the views of policy advisors and university staff with detailed analysis of policy issues comparing it to what is actually happening in practice through the case studies. The research data is drawn from interviews with policy advisors and academics at three post-1992 British universities. The main themes emerging are resistance to WBL programmes and a disjuncture between government policy and practice.

Keywords: work-based learning, higher education, government

Each of the universities contained within the study has a history of involvement with work-based learning (WBL) programmes and a different approach to their WBL provision. The paper will examine the current government strategy on higher education informed by the views of policy advisors and university staff with detailed analysis of current policy issues and comparing it to what is actually happening in practice through the case studies.

Policy Issues Relating to Work-based Learning Programmes

In order to set the context in which the interviews took place two key policy documents on higher education in England will be examined: the White Paper 'The future of higher education' (DfES, 2003) and the 'HEFCE strategic plan 2003-08' (HEFCE, 2003). The new strategy for higher education in England (DfES, 2003) made public a number of key developments relating to the future of British higher education which will shape the growing relationship between business and the academy and the future provision of work-based learning in higher education:

Higher education in the UK generates over £34 billion for our economy and supports more than half a million jobs. But less than one in five businesses taps into universities' skills and knowledge. Universities and colleges can play a bigger role in creating jobs and prosperity' (DfES, 2003: 6).

The Conservative Governments of the 1980s and the Labour Governments of 1997 and 2001 have argued that the main role of higher education is to serve the economy

more efficiently and develop closer links with industry and commerce along with promoting enterprise. The developments within the White Paper 'The future of higher education' (DfES, 2003) reflect this approach in its priorities: building stronger links between universities and business through third stream funding and plans to rapidly expand the number of Foundation degrees on offer, which will in turn increase employer and university partnerships.

The HEFCE strategic plan (HEFCE, 2003) has been developed taking into account the White Paper 'The future of higher education' (DfES, 2003) and in many ways reflects the views of the government in stressing the importance of human capital and meeting the needs of employers. The strategic plan has four core strategic aims: widening participation and fair access; enhancing excellence in learning and teaching; enhancing excellence in research and enhancing the contribution of HE to the economy and society. It points to funding Centres of Excellence in teaching in some universities, 'promoting and rewarding a vital role for less research-intensive HEIs in knowledge transfer and innovation' (HEFCE, 2003: 28), and 'As funding for research is inevitably limited, this is likely to mean that the pursuit of leading-edge world-class research is a distinctive mission for only some HEIs' (HEFCE, 2003: 22). This final aim of 'Enhancing the contribution of HE to the economy and society' reflects the growing strength of the so-called knowledge economy and the role that higher education will play in developing it. HEFCE acknowledge the importance of partnerships to benefit local economies throughout their strategy and will identify funding streams to reflect this priority. This emphasis on forming partnerships is representative of the governments drive to grow the knowledge-based economy, which they argue is dependent on the effective sharing of knowledge between business and higher education. This will lead to improvements in economic competitiveness and our quality of life.

The government strategy on higher education (DfES, 2003) stresses what the HEFCE policy advisor describes as '...the focus on vocational education and progression becoming more important throughout the education sector from schools into higher education' and a critical part of this approach is working in partnerships. Within the government strategy these partnerships are planned to be in a number of different forms such as Knowledge Exchanges and links with the further education sector. The roles of Knowledge Exchanges are to a large extent designed for the less research intense universities as the policy advisor at the DfES identified:

This initiative really sits on the cusp between knowledge and transfer, which is typically more traditionally associated with research based universities and skills development. We have made it clear that we do expect these exchanges to meet the needs of less research intensive institutions and also to recognise that there are skills and needs associated in knowledge transfer as well as just a transfer of knowledge itself in other words wanting to increase research development and identify new incentives and products.

The Knowledge Exchanges will also be linked into regional economic strategies with the involvement of agencies such as the Regional Development Agency (RDA) and the local Learning and Skills Councils (LSC). The higher education strategy (DfES, 2003) emphasises that Knowledge Exchanges are to become a permanent feature of third stream funding helping a diverse range of further and higher education

institutions to become involved in the initiative. The partnership working needed to develop the Knowledge Exchanges will require collaboration between further and higher education institutions and the White Paper on higher education gives this approach a significant boost.

The government strategy on higher education clearly sees a role for collaboration between further and higher education and they want to remove any unnecessary bureaucracy and review 'the administrative and legislative barriers that exist to improve greater integration of systems' (DfES, 2003: 63). This collaboration has other advantages for the government in that further education is much cheaper per full-time equivalent student than in higher education and potentially recruiting new students into further education is easier, which will help the government meet their target numbers of students entering higher education. The building of bridges for the FE sector to become more involved with higher education will take time and there will be the potential problem of duplication and overlap of provision, which will only be avoided through careful planning, and management of the various initiatives.

Methodology

The policy issues emerging from the research data come from semi-structured interviews with policy advisors at the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and the Director of the National Centre for Work-based Learning Partnerships (NCWBLP) based at Middlesex University.

The paper is based on a qualitative research strategy, which uses a case study approach focusing on semi-structured interviews exploring the perceptions of university staff involved in WBL programmes. The research is multiple-case involving work-based learning programmes at three post-1992 British universities. The academics selected for interview were a senior manager within the school or university with responsibility for WBL; the Dean or Deputy Dean or their equivalent within each school; the WBL Programme Leader, and a WBL academic with teaching and management responsibilities related to WBL programmes. Each interview was 45 minutes to one hour in length and taped. In terms of research design, all three institutions were analysed together to identify themes from the research in order to address the research question how do academics and students view the strengths and weaknesses of the work-based learning approach in the context of higher education?

The reliability of the research will be increased by triangulation through gathering the data from multiple sources at each university. Ultimately analysis of the research data may lead to cross-case conclusions, which modify or develop theories. The research design will need to have validity, which will be achieved by the critical sections of the research such as the choice of case studies, interview schedules, information recording and data analysis being reviewed by a panel of experts guiding the researcher in the design and supervision of the study.

The general approach to data analysis relates to the theoretical proposition that formed the basis of the research question, which is the growing dominance of a political discourse that supports closer ties between universities and industry. The research

question is derived from the theoretical proposition and will shape the data collection plan and help to focus attention on certain data and to ignore other data. A series of data matrices were developed that display the qualitative data in a way that makes the complex data more understandable by reducing it to its component parts as detailed in the work of Miles and Huberman (1994). These component parts were originally derived from a detailed 20,000-word written account based on analysis of the transcripts on a case by case basis identifying initial themes closely related to the research questions. The coding process has involved clustering chunks of data in relation to each part of the research questions in the data matrices and placing them in sub-categories, which reflect the key themes emerging. The insight gained from stepping back and looking at the matrices as a whole helped in developing the sub-categories. This approach also helped in identifying linkages between seemingly unrelated component parts, further highlighting salient issues.

University A

University A is a post-1992 university in the North of England and has a history of involvement in widening access initiatives. The main research was focused on the postgraduate WBL programmes within the Business School. The academics interviewed were the WBL Programme Manager within the Centre for Lifelong Learning (CLL), the Deputy Director with responsibility for postgraduate programmes and quality, the Programme Leader for WBL programmes, and an academic responsible for teaching and designing WBL programmes. In the past the school has been involved in a number of programmes with a strong WBL element such as a Masters in Management Practice (MMP), Certificate in Management Competence and NVQ 4/5 in management. The MMP was replaced by the MBA (Public Management) in 2001 which was a qualification that met the needs of the public sector but with more of an emphasis on a taught programme of study. The type of students that come onto the WBL programmes are mainly supervisory and middle management, and some programmes have used the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APEL) process to help managers to enter directly onto the diploma stage.

University B

University B is a post-1992 university based in the South East. The WBL programmes are spread across a number of schools and at a dedicated WBL centre where the research was based. The WBL programmes offered by the centre at University B are built around three stages: Learning review and planning, Project design and Project implementation. The first stage involves an evaluation of prior learning called Recognition and Accreditation of Learning (RAL). The second part of stage one is Planning Work Based Learning which includes designing your personal WBL programme in negotiation with your employer and the university leading to an individual learning agreement containing the proposed study plan. Another approach taken at this stage is a Review and Development of Work Based Learning which includes a review of previous certified learning developed into a personal and professional development plan negotiated with the employer and university. The second stage involves designing a proposal for a real-life work-based project and the

third stage involves implementing your research project in the workplace. The curriculum is developed through feeding into the core process modules, which are Recognition and Accreditation of Learning (RAL), Programme Planning, Research Methods and the Project. In terms of how the partnership approach to WBL works then the process is usually triggered off by an accreditation activity. This would involve examining what learning the organisation has and to systematically identify, quantify and use within the programme.

The interviews with the academics concentrated on the postgraduate WBL programmes and the general approach taken within the centre. . The interviewees were the Postgraduate Curriculum Leader and the Head of Research in respect of her research role but also as a Programme Leader. The programmes that the centre offers ranges from undergraduate qualifications in WBL such as Bachelor of Arts (BA) through to postgraduate including Postgraduate Diploma (PGDip), Master of Arts (MA) and the Doctorate in Professional Studies (DProf). Each of the programmes has a learning contract and a high degree of flexibility so that people can design their own programme. The programme attracts students from the public sector, voluntary sector and self employed.

University C

University C is a post-1992 university based in the South of England and has a history of providing WBL programmes across the university. The research for the WBL programmes was based in the Business School and the focus of the research was the MSc in Contract Management, which is typical of their corporate WBL programme. The corporate view was provided by the Business Development Director who stated that each faculty has their own mission, which feeds into the university vision. The academics interviewed were the WBL Programme Leader, a lecturer responsible for teaching on the WBL programmes and the Associate Dean responsible for teaching and learning.

The Business School has a fast track Integrated Flexible Masters Programme (IFM) and has targets to develop and deliver WBL programmes. The programme is aimed at corporate clients and has an employee learning contract, which is a written agreement between the employee, the university and company mentor setting out the programme plan.

What is Happening in Practice? Case Study Findings

From the detailed analysis of the data matrices the strengths and weaknesses of the WBL approach will be examined drawing out the key themes relating to the research question.

The academics identified a number of benefits, for example at university A there had been an increase in the numbers of students enrolling onto WBL programmes bringing extra revenue into the university. At university C the benefits of the WBL programmes for the Business School were financial, helping partnership working with local employers and developing alternative approaches to teaching and

learning. For the Director of the centre at university B there were clear benefits for the WBL student who was able to take control of their own learning and link it to professional development and knowledge of value in the workplace as he argues:

I think the lasting benefit is making them a more effective work based learner so that they are better able to cope with the changing demands of the workplace. They are able to be, in their own right, knowledge workers, to be knowledge creators, users and they are far better equipped in that role from the work based learning programme.

The other major strength identified by the academics was the flexibility that WBL programmes offered. At university B the Postgraduate Curriculum Leader emphasised that for corporate WBL programmes the employer can vary the programme to meet their needs and the Head of Research pointed out that they also offer customised programmes to a diverse range of clients.

The Curriculum leader at university B stressed that many of the students commencing programmes at the centre have not come through traditional academic routes. Many do not have a first degree and are seeking validation for their experience. For university C the process of managing the learning process on the WBL programmes is via a learning contract with each student. This contract is the vehicle for managing the quality of the learning process and they have to agree it with their workplace mentor and course tutor. It measures the outputs in relation to their work-based assignment. The contract according to the Associate Dean is a measurable tool, which can be used to see whether the programme is meeting the needs of the student. The learning contract is viewed as a living document because things can change rapidly and the contract needs to be dynamic so it can meet changed priorities at work.

The weaknesses emerging from the research study are a disjuncture between government policy and practice and resistance to WBL. The theme of resistance can be linked to two possible causal factors. Government policy on higher education since the 1980s has been dominated by an emphasis on employability and economic competitiveness. Combined with the increasing role of central government through directing funding, introduction of an inspection culture and a more managerial focus the culture within British universities has been through changes which have been arguably the most dramatic that have occurred in the whole history of higher education (Symes, 2001). As detailed earlier the drive for vocationalism in a mass higher education system has resulted argues Barnett (1997) in the emergence of a new vocabulary for higher educational curricula with such terms as transferable skills, enterprise, outcomes, capability, and WBL. This narrow approach and the undermining of the role of academics has possibly forced many into a situation where the only way to deal with challenges to their autonomy and resist the changing culture is to resist new developments such as WBL. There is also resistance to WBL because academics perceive it as a watering down of intellectual standards and not a field of study in its own right.

The disjuncture between government policy and practice on WBL is another theme that has arisen from the research study. The universities in the research study are at the forefront of developments in WBL and many of these initiatives, particularly at postgraduate level, do not fit into HEFCE funding streams. This makes pursuing

innovative WBL developments difficult because higher education institutions will focus on where the funding is concentrated, and winning over management becomes more difficult. As a result government policy needs to have flexibility in funding arrangements so that ring fenced funding is available for innovative WBL developments.

The introduction of new initiatives such as the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) and Knowledge Exchanges under permanent third stream funding arrangements will mean that WBL programmes will need to compete in higher education institutions as they may lose out to other initiatives. As Reeve and Gallacher (2003) point out WBL developments within universities in the UK are limited and marginal to more mainstream activities. The evidence from the research is that there is a general lack of awareness amongst academic staff of WBL developments and this is perhaps indicative of WBL failing to have a wider impact within British higher education. In order for WBL to gain a higher profile then the government strategy on higher education needs to fill the gap with the appropriate resources. To some extent this is evident with Foundation degrees but other innovative developments, such as programmes identified within the research study, need to be included as well.

Conclusion

The policy of forging closer ties between higher education and business in the British government strategy on higher education means there will be a focus on expanding WBL provision. This will involve the rapid development of Foundation degree programmes and third stream activities such as HEIF, but it is not clear how it will impact on other WBL programmes such as the type involved in the research study. There does not appear to be any specific funding designated for the development of WBL programmes outside of Foundation degrees. The establishment of Knowledge Exchanges is designed to build ‘...on the permanent third stream of funding’ (HEFCE, 2003: 28), but there is no explicit mention of WBL. The Knowledge Exchanges will involve examining issues of workplace learning as the higher education strategy argues ‘...working with business to develop the skills of the workforce at technical and professional levels’ (DfES, 2003: 37). The conclusion to draw is that higher education institutions with HEIF funding or Knowledge Exchanges will be left with discretion in how they seek partnerships with industry and commerce, and this could be used in a number of ways such as consultancy, help with the growth of new companies and application of new technology. This will leave the funding at the discretion of senior managers within each higher education institution. This leaves a disjuncture between policy and practice because as the DfES policy advisor argued ‘...the concept of work-based learning is something that the Ministers would wish to see developed across the board’, yet the academics involved in the WBL programmes within the research study are struggling to see this support and funding being translated into practice.

In implementing the higher education strategy and in particular WBL many higher education institutions will use the planned approach to change, which with its array of tools and techniques has been a dominant approach to managing organisational change. It is an approach that is flexible, holistic and can incorporate transformational

change (Cummings and Worley, 2001; French and Bell, 1995). From the 1980s this approach has faced increased criticism that it cannot deal with radical change and power and politics within organisations, and new approaches to managing change have emerged. These approaches have a range of labels but are often referred to as the emergent approach, which sees change as driven from the bottom up rather than top down. It views change as an open-ended and continuous process with an emphasis on organisational learning. The disjuncture between policy and practice identified in the case study findings highlights problems with the planned approach in that the government strategy on higher education and the approach of the institutions towards WBL do not take into account the organisational politics that exist. The issues raised in the research study are resistance from academics and a lack of support from management to introduce innovative WBL programmes. A more dynamic and bottom-up approach is also needed to help motivate academics to develop innovative WBL programmes in the future as Burnes (2004: 296) argues:

A bottom-up approach requires a major change in the role of senior managers. Instead of controlling employees, they have to empower people. Instead of directing and controlling change, they have to ensure that the organisation's members are receptive to, and have the necessary skills, motivation and power to take charge of, the change process.

The research study has produced data that helps to develop our understanding of the workings of WBL programmes within British higher education highlighting the growing influence that the business sector is having on higher education. There are many examples of government policies encouraging this from the 1980s onwards. Some recent examples are the growing impact of the Foundation degree promoting employer involvement and changes in HEFCE funding towards programmes that support closer ties with business. This approach is seen as critical to the future strategy of higher education and likely to become more pronounced during the third term of the 2005 Labour Government. This maybe the rhetoric but the reality from some of the research findings is quite different. Many of the WBL programmes are struggling to find a voice in the academy and the research data points to them suffering from a number of problems. These problems come from institutions with a substantial WBL portfolio so other universities with little experience in WBL will find it difficult to develop in this area. The post-1992 universities within the research study could make more of their WBL programmes but along with other 'new' universities aspire to be more like the traditional universities as they attempt to gain more kudos through greater research profiles.

The government objectives underlying the policy advocating closer ties between higher education and business represent the dominance of a political discourse that attempts to justify education primarily in economic terms. With the drive for closer ties between higher education and business in its various guises then the interesting question will be whether universities will embrace the government philosophy. The programmes within this study have to compete with traditional types of programmes, which is difficult given the financial incentives for higher education institutions to recruit students onto campus-based undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. The aim of government for increased business-university collaboration may be the dominant theme of policy but the research within this study provides clear examples of a lack of support and commitment from

institutions towards this approach. The barriers preventing WBL taking off are cultural in the sense that this type of programme is not embedded in the academy and a shift in attitudes from academics and managers is needed if these programmes are ever going to move from the margins of higher education. There are also financial barriers in the running of these programmes as they are more labour intensive and therefore expensive compared to the standard programme. It also requires a great deal of work in establishing programmes of this nature from finding employers as partners to identifying their needs and writing and validating these types of programmes. Academics are possibly reluctant to take on these roles given there are few incentives for them to do so. There is real resistance to the dominant role of business in the running of higher education. The rhetoric of the importance of close ties between business and higher education will continue but there needs to be checks on what is actually happening on the ground in terms of policy implementation. The evidence from the research data is that the reality is different to the rhetoric and that there will be clear obstacles in meeting this agenda.

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