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Impact Study Report

University of Chester

1. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The University of Chester is grateful to the former students and their employers who gave their time and goodwill to contribute to this study by participating in the interviews.

Particular thanks go to Jean Armstrong for arranging the interviews and for typing the transcripts.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study aims to examine aspects of the impact of work based learning on both employees and employers and forms part of a larger scale study undertaken by the HE Academy.

Employees who had successfully completed work based learning programmes of study at undergraduate level (excluding Foundation Degrees) were interviewed as, where possible, was their line manager or employer representative. Several issues arose concerning access to employers for interviews, which in some cases extended to difficulties in gaining access to former learners from organisational cohorts.

Evidence emerging from the study highlights the effectiveness of higher level negotiated work based learning programmes in developing employees in ways that extend beyond role-specific competence. In particular, benefits in the development of self-awareness; learning to think and question; and improved confidence and work performance were valued by employees and employers alike. Work based learning projects, involving the reflection on practical experience, were thought to have benefited both individuals and organisations. More than half of the employees interviewed have since changed jobs or gained promotion, and the majority are now engaged in further higher level programmes of study.

Employer support is seen to be an important factor for most learners, but not for all. The role of the HE tutor, though, is seen by learners as central to their success. Credit accumulation and accreditation of prior learning and experience are significant stages in engaging learners and facilitating their progression. Most learners are highly self-motivating, but cohort learners on programmes designed through

employers need to be supported by them in the course of their studies. In-house programmes linked to assessment for HE accreditation need to be well-integrated and learners clearly advised by the employer on the commitment and expectations.

Future research in this area could focus on the complexities of more extensive evaluation of employer perspectives, and on learners who do not complete a qualification but who may nonetheless have benefited and who may resume studies in future.

3. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The University of Chester is one of several Higher Education Institutions from across the UK which undertook to conduct interviews and submit a report to the Higher Education Academy on the impact of work based learning programmes of study. The University offers work based learning programmes and uses its Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) framework as the basis for negotiating programmes of study both for individuals and for cohorts. Although the framework is overseen by the Faculty of Lifelong Learning, it is validated for use by Faculties throughout the University, and is structured to include generic modules designed to develop the capacity to learn critically through workplace experience as well as to include more discipline specific modules, where appropriate.

The framework is used as the basis for the design and approval of programmes at undergraduate and post-graduate levels, and may lead to full degree or other, shorter awards. Single credit-bearing modules may also be taken for continuing professional development purposes.

The individual former learners interviewed in the course of this study were employed in or by:

- A national private organisation in the diet and fitness industry, which franchises to the self-employed
- Higher Education
- A National Health Service Trust
- The civil service, working for the military.

These learners all successfully completed undergraduate honours degrees negotiated through the University's Work Based and Integrative Studies framework.

The former cohort learners interviewed were employed as civil servants in a large government department. They had initially completed a single 15 credit module, as originally commissioned by the employer by building accreditation on to an existing in-house programme of workshops, before proceeding to complete a further three modules to qualify for the award of a 60 credit undergraduate Professional Certificate.

4. AIMS

The broad aim of the overall study is to build an overview of evidence of impact of the experience, both on the employees themselves and on their employers, of undertaking programmes of higher level study through work based learning.

5. METHODOLOGY FOR STUDY

Following an initial meeting at the Academy between representatives of participating institutions, at which drafts of interview questions were considered and suggestions made for amendment, final versions of the interview schedules for employees and employers were circulated to each institution. The intention was that these should provide a standard and consistent basis for investigating the impact on each constituent group across all institutions.

The University of Chester agreed to undertake research with those who had undertaken undergraduate, rather than postgraduate, programmes of study, and to conduct interviews with five former students who had undertaken individually negotiated studies, and with five who had undertaken their programme as part of an employer-based cohort. For each former student, a representative of the employing organisation, who was in a position to comment on the impact of the employee's studies, was also to be interviewed.

It had been agreed that Foundation Degrees would be excluded from the scope of this study, thereby excluding one large section of the University's work with cohorts. This limited the number of available instances where cohorts had completed their studies one to two years previously, as required by the terms of the research. By definition, those cohorts who had completed a level of study but not yet the full award of an employer-based foundation degree were also excluded, although there could well be potential evidence of impact on either individual or employer, or both, from learning and achievement to date.

A number of issues arose in practice which affected the implementation of the research methodology as intended. These are worth noting, as they also have an influence on the wider conclusions that may be drawn from the study, and in some cases illuminate the complexities of undertaking research into impact in general and in the context of work based learning in particular.

Issues of methodology relating to cohorts

One area of difficulty experienced was in gaining agreement within the timescale of the study from some employers of cohorts of learners with whom the University had worked on the successful design, delivery and completion of programmes. In the scope of this particular study, there were a number of different reasons for this:

- (i) In the first case, the contract between the employer and the University to provide the programme to subsequent cohorts was the subject of ongoing renegotiation. The sensitivities in this situation were not exceptional, but of a nature that might routinely arise in these circumstances and compromise the opportunity for research activity. There had been changes in the employing organisation and in the personnel undertaking negotiations with the University, and channels of communication had become complex. The contact between the University and the employer was therefore on a slightly different basis until the process of tendering or other renegotiation had been completed, although the relationship remained good. Because of these commercial sensitivities, therefore, the university was not in a position to press the request made to the employer to participate in the research. This was unfortunate, as the case study had the potential to provide a rich source of relevant material which was as a result unavailable to this study.

- (ii) A similarly promising source of evidence from another employer also eventually proved unavailable due to political sensitivities surrounding the introduction and evaluation of the programme of study by the organisation, a government department. The programme, which the employer has reported as extremely successful, has been subject to extensive internal evaluation within the organisation itself and there was considerable reluctance to allow further investigation at the current time. It was also indicated that the procedures involved in applying for clearance and consent from senior staff in the organisation would not be straightforward, would be prohibitive in the available timescale and would in any case be highly unlikely to lead to agreement in the current circumstances. The employer's own impact evaluation has been extremely positive. The University is still engaged with this employer in delivering the programme to subsequent cohorts.
- (iii) One further potential cohort was unavailable as the former students contacted failed to respond. The one student from this cohort who did respond was therefore interviewed as an individual.
- (iv) In the case of the cohort included in this study, the employees involved had some difficulty in identifying an appropriate individual to be interviewed on behalf of the organisation, as line managers and organisational structures, affecting those who had commissioned the programme from the University, had changed several times both since they started and since they completed their programme of study. In this instance, a training manager was identified and interviewed, but further issues arising from this will be highlighted later in this report.

The outcome of these constraints was that within the timescale of the study, it proved possible to interview only two former learners from one employer cohort. The processes of enquiry involved in approaching the other employers, though ultimately unproductive, were nonetheless thoroughly pursued and therefore time-consuming.

Issues of methodology relating to individual learners

Two main issues arose, in addition to the more general point that the 'employer' does not represent an homogenous group, and that aggregations and comparisons of responses therefore need to be treated with some caution.

- (i) In one instance the former learner interviewed was unable to identify any individual who could speak on behalf of his employer. He was employed as a civilian, working for one of the armed forces, and those who had been aware of his studies at the time were no longer geographically available or, in one case, living. The individual had decided to study entirely on an individual basis and although the learning was work based, this had not involved his employers. In this sense, the situation is not dissimilar to someone who is self-employed.
- (ii) In a second case, it transpired during the course of their interview that the individual nominated by the learner was not in fact an employer representative, but a work based tutor employed by the HE provider. It appeared that the learner did not wish her actual line manager of that time to be approached. The learner had now left that organisation and may have felt that the responses of the line manager would have been negatively influenced by these circumstances and by their previous working relationship. This situation highlights, however, one of the limitations of this study, in that it

was agreed that employers should only be interviewed with the agreement of the individual employee in each case. This is therefore likely to have excluded by design those employers who might have had a perspective contrary to, or conflicting with, that of their employee. For example, an employer might have felt that an employee who had left the organisation soon after completing their programme of study had not represented a good investment of resources. This view, though, is not so likely to forthcoming in the data for this study, given that employers have been interviewed only in cases where employee consent has been given.

- (iii) In one case, the 'employee' was self-employed but the 'employer' interview was provided by a representative of the organisation providing the franchise.

The outcome of these constraints was that although five individual former learners were interviewed, only three of these were both able and willing to provide a suitable contact for an employer interview. Of the two who did not provide an appropriate contact, one had given details of their former work based learning tutor instead. This interview was undertaken face to face, but the responses have not been reported or analysed as it became clear that the interviewee was not in a position to speak on behalf of the employer.

Interviews were conducted during September and October 2007. Some interviews were undertaken face to face, others by telephone:

Individual learners (5)	Employers of individual learners (3)	Cohort learners (2)	Employer of cohort learners (1)
3 face to face 2 telephone	1 face to face 2 telephone	2 face to face	1 telephone

All interviews were recorded with the prior consent of the interviewee.

The researcher is a senior member of the University staff with a research interest in work based learning, who was not involved in any capacity with the design, delivery or assessment of any of these programmes.

6. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The responses are summarised and reported under the sections of the discussion guides, as requested in the guidance notes. However, it will be seen that quite often an answer is given which may relate more closely to another, subsequent section. This will be taken into consideration in the overall analysis of cross-cutting findings.

Employee perspectives

A. Context

Of the 5 individual learners, 4 had changed their role since completing their programme of study:

Employee	Current role	Role as began study	Previous roles
A	University lecturer	Research midwife	Range in NHS
B	Learning and Information	Information officer	Lower scale IT

	Services manager		technician
C	Online manager, health and fitness business	Health and fitness teacher (franchisee)	Yoga teacher
D	Air crew acoustics instructor (civilian)	Air crew acoustics instructor (civilian)	Military acoustics operator; special forces; intelligence; instructor
E	Deputy ward manager	Staff nurse	Overseas nursing

The individual learners had been in their roles between 2 and 6 years before starting their programme of study. Those currently with the same organisations have worked there for 7-10 years; one changed organisation and role 2 years ago.

Of the 2 cohort learners who work as civil servants in a large government department, one (F) had changed role; for the other (G), specific tasks and duties had varied. They had been in their roles for only about 3-6 months before commencing study but have worked in the civil service for 20 and 25 years respectively; one moved to the current department 5 years ago. Both reported a tendency to move roles every six, nine or twelve months; since joining the department 5 years ago, one (F) had held 10 to 12 roles. The department has recently undergone a major restructuring, dividing into two departments.

The level of learners' prior qualifications ranged from RSA certificate to DipHE:

Employee	Current highest qualifications	Highest qualification when began programme	Other professional development undertaken/reasons
A	BSc(hons)	DipHE, registered nurse and midwife	None - doing MEd
B	BSc(hons)	'A' level (plus level 1 from a previous BSc but no exit qualification)	Chartered with British Computing Society; Short vendor-based qualifications in IT
C	BSc(hons)	RSA teacher's certificate (plus two and half years on previous degree but no exit qualification)	Couple of one day courses
D	BSc(hons)	'O' levels	Specialist military programmes
E	BSc(hons)	SRN and registered midwife, DipHE	Mandatory training to keep up registration
F	Professional Certificate (60 credits at L1)	'A' level	Short work-related courses
G	Professional Certificate (60 credits at L1)	'A' level	Short work-related courses

In summary:

- 2 DipHE /registered nurses and midwives
- 3 'A' level
- 1 'O' level
- 1 RSA teaching certificate
- 2 previously started undergraduate studies but withdrawn before completion.

5 of the learners have already progressed to further higher level study programmes.

B. Motivation

The individual learners were all primarily self-motivated; most said that their employer had had nothing to do with it, although (C) emphasised it had been made possible by her employer.

The cohort learners had started their programme by attending a short in-house course which was then linked to accreditation and from which they proceeded to study three further modules to gain their certificate. Therefore they had not started off by studying for an academic award or credit, initially. One classed herself as self-motivating (G); the other attended initially because her line manager felt strongly that she should, because she was new to the grade (F).

Self-motivating reasons stated fell into four main categories:

- To open up new opportunities and career progression (A, B, E, G)
- Feelings of under-achievement (B)
- Interest in the subject, wanting to learn more (C)
- Wanting to improve ways of doing things at work (C, D).

The most frequently-reported factor in self-motivation, therefore, was to open up new opportunities for career progression and promotion.

The nature and extent of a sense of career path at the start of the programme of study varied. Of the five individual learners, two (C, E) recalled a clear sense of career path or future direction and their aspirations have remained the same. (C) also reported that

'My career aspirations are still much the same, but it has awakened a desire to study which I didn't realise I had, it must have been quite dormant and I found it fascinating and I've continued with it ever since.'

One (D) had not expected his role to change before retirement but now finds he is being head-hunted to work in the same role by another organisation and expects to move there. One (A) had wanted to study to be able to change her employment and her career, and one (B) had not been clear about the path but had known that he wanted to 'manage others rather than be managed'.

The cohort learners (F, G) had wanted to progress further up the grade levels within the department but interestingly had not seen this as 'a career path as such'. However one, (F) also reports that the course was 'flavour of the month' in the department at the time and that she

'knew that for career purposes it would be good to not only undertake but to complete the programme and put it on my CV'.

There is therefore evidence that all learners had some sense of their future career in mind when they began their programme of study, but that the strength and clarity of this varied between respondents and was not very specific.

C. Needs

Neither of the cohort learners had been clear about what they hoped to get out of the learning and development; one (G) said of the non-accredited in-house course:

'I'd heard others talking about (it) and they thought it was a good programme...(I thought) it might help me in my role as a leader or line manager and that it would help me improve as a manager of people'.

The other (F) reported:

'I thought I was just going on a programme of seminars. I didn't realise that I would be going on to further qualifications and study'.

In both cases, the identification of expectations had been informal, through discussion with line managers, although this fed forward into more formal routine review processes later. The comments of (F) highlight the influence of the line manager:

'My line manager at the time was probably one of the best ...I've had...his background was HR and training – and he was very much in favour of this. If I'm honest without his backing and gentle persuasion I probably wouldn't have gone on it'.

Neither learner was aware at the start of their programme that they would be undertaking academic study and assignments, as these were introduced at a later stage, rather than integrated with the in-house programme.

Of the individual learners, one (A) had *'no particular expectations'* but *'had got more out of it than I could possibly have anticipated'*. No guidance process with the employer was reported.

The other individual learners had clearer expectations but the emphasis, and the process with employer, had been slightly different for each:

- Feeling capable of doing the subject-based element, but not having anticipated the reflective approach to work based learning; informal conversations with line manager about *'how it would align with what he wanted out of me in terms of an employee'* (B)
- Wanting to use an opportunity to see what could be achieved:

'I hoped that it would empower me to learn...initially I was just looking for the fulfilment of a dream...to be honest, I didn't think I could do the degree, I thought it might be too much for me...I wanted the framework within which to learn'. The employee undertook an initial set of four modules designed by the University and the company together; 'there was always the understanding that we could go on to the degree in nutrition, exercise or whatever but they left it up to us to decide'. (C)

- (D)'s employer gave information about two universities for work based learning, which the learner then investigated himself:

'I wanted knowledge...the title meant nothing to me... It was the knowledge that I gained by doing the degree that mattered so that I could make myself a better teacher.'

- Wanting to gain the academic level of professional understanding. Initially the programme was identified informally with the manager, then formalised within the development programme:

'Because we had such a good working relationship and it was work based learning, we were able to tailor the programme around some of the work based needs so that the study that I did incorporated stuff that could be brought back. The learning that I was undertaking was to be sort of recycled, if you like, and to be actually utilised within the ward environment which worked very well.' (E).

D. Programme of Study

All learners had heard about the programme of study through their employer, who in all cases but one already had some links with the provider HEI.

Reasons given for choosing the HE provider were given as:

- It was local and convenient (A, B, E)
- It was the only one offered (C, F, G)
- *'The tutor I spoke to was very, very helpful and I liked what I saw, I liked the town, I liked the way the whole thing was worked out'* (D)
- Previous study with the providing institution, although a different department:

'...(work based learning) appealed to my skills and the fact that it wasn't going to be purely academic studies for academic sake. It felt that it was going to give me a way of developing practice in the workplace and having the academic side to fall back on, to be able to explore how I could relate the two in my working life' (E).

Other options considered, and reasons for rejection were:

- Day release – would take too long (A)
- OU/distance learning – would take too long (A); distance learning *'lonely'* and exams didn't fit in with work calendar (B); some distance learning programmes still too specific about attendance requirements, not flexible enough (C); familiarity with existing HE provider (E)
- Another HEI – not impressed and further away (B)

All responses about the extent to which the programme of study had met individual learners' needs and expectations were extremely positive. Specific reasons given often also referred to benefits and impact (see next section) and included:

- Being able to choose and tailor modules to the learner's own needs (A, E)
- Being able to go at the learner's own pace (A) Those who were very motivated could progress very quickly.
- Flexibility (C)
- Being able to use existing work being undertaken in the workplace to write up for reflection:

'I learnt far more about what I was doing and why I was doing it, what the impact of what I was doing was having on the workplace and I became far more self aware.' (A).

'What I think I got was much more than I could have hoped for because it was reflection. It made me realise there's more to learning than sitting in a classroom and reading what's on the board, or on a handout or in a handbook – it's more about reflection. (B)

- Feeling that tuition was very one-to-one: *'they were available to me at times that were suitable to my work life, my timetable.'* (E)

The cohort workers had not initially expected to take an accredited programme, and had started originally without clear needs or expectations:

'I did get more out of it than I expected to – the one thing I got out of it more than anything was increased self confidence in my role at work... but I had got no pre-conceived ideas of what it held for me at all – I went into it blind.' (F)

'...accreditation came afterwards and had I known about that before I would have done the workshops very differently and focussed my attention in a different way because I realised at the end how those workshops could feed into the work I needed to do to do the assignments at the end of it so I would have perhaps approached it in a different way.' (G)

Employees received different aspects of support from employers, and to varying degrees:

Employee	Time	Funding	Encouragement	Comment
A	yes	partial	no	More funding would have helped
B	yes	yes	yes	Line manager had to be persuaded at first to support education rather than IT training
C	no	no	yes, all the time	The first person to do the course
D	no	75% fees plus travel and accommodation		
E	yes	yes	yes	More time
F	yes	yes		Programme not thought through
G	yes	yes		

Fuller comments relating to support for the programme of study included:

'My particular line manager was very encouraging and because before I completed it I did a double work based project which was very involved in reviewing a particular aspect of a problem at work so it became a focus point for the whole team, so they were very encouraged that I was undertaking a particular piece of work that would lead to results and outcomes for better practice so the team then supported me as well to complete that. It became something that wasn't just about me doing some academic study for my own personal qualification, it became something that was integrated into the ward and into our daily working practice. (E)

'I think in theory the idea was very, very good, but nobody had thought about the practical side of it, because one of my biggest bugbears about it and one of the things that I found most difficult... is that now having gone through the programme I can see that it was delivered wrongly as well, not just sold to us wrongly, because the programme of study should have happened at the same time as the workshops, because the workshops would have been invaluable to the assignments that we were doing, whereas I completed six months of workshops only to find at the end of the six months that right, this is the programme of study. I would have had a completely different attitude and I would have gone into the seminars asking different questions and looking to get different things out of them, so really the two should have run alongside each other and they shouldn't have gone workshops and then study because that made things very, very difficult – I don't know if that's where they fell apart... The actual content of the study or what was in it for me as an individual or for the department has never really been discussed.' (F)

E. Benefits and impact

A number of respondents referred to personal benefits that could be described as holistic or generic, including:

- Self-awareness (A, F)
- Learning to think and question (A, B, C)
- Greater confidence, leading to improved performance at work (D, F, G)
- Updating, insights into ways of working (E)

Within these, learners often cited the importance of reflection based approaches to learning, based on activities and experience at work:

'...because it was so reflection based and integrated with making me think about what I was doing within my job and why I was doing it and how I could do it better, that it changed my perspective on what I was doing and I think it stopped me being less of a technician who did as he was told to being more of the sort of person who questions 'why are we doing it like that?'. It affected not only my professional life but my personal life as well because it made me change my opinions about a lot of things – it made me question what and why something was happening.' (B)

'I believe it got me to think – it kind of unlocked something.' (C)

'Having done the reflective reviews – which are something I've never really done before, I've never looked at my own performance, and I've always been quite negative about my own performance and its only when I've explored it, put it down on paper and read it back myself that I've actually had the self belief – well actually that is me and I have done that.' (F)

'I think I did because the ILP programme was a lot about reflection and where you were at a certain point where you could look back. It made you think about why you would have acted in a certain way and obviously the theories that came out of it, management theories...' (G)

Professional benefits were given as:

- Change of job or promotion (A, B, C, E)

- Structure led to becoming a 'reflective practitioner', change in ways of thinking at work (B)
- Offer of increased income (D)
- Professional confidence (E)
- Role development likely to support future promotion (F, G)

Each learner provided a slightly different response to the question on organisational benefits:

- Improved quality of work, greater innovation (A)
- Ability to question more and think in terms of the bigger picture, and how the individual's activity affects others (B)
- Award to the organisation for offering extra training to franchisees (C)
- Organisational evidence that the standard of students trained by the individual has gone up (D)
- Individual able to make informed contribution to consultation and debate about restructuring of the service (E)
- Individual's improved performance rankings (F)
- Helping organisation reach its training targets and being a better manager of people (G)

Just over half the respondents thought that there had been some change and impact in their workplace as a result:

- Individuals in new roles in the same organisation felt they had been able to effect change by virtue of having been positioned to be in those roles (B, C).
- One respondent (D) reported that he had been able to shorten the course he was delivering and so save his organisation money. Likewise, he was now also able to squeeze more into the same period of time, thereby increasing the taught content and providing better value for money.
- Another individual (E) reported direct changes to working practices as a result of her project.
- Three respondents (A, F, G) were unable to identify any changes or direct organisational impact arising from their learning and development.

Other factors identified as having a significant impact on work performance included:

- The tutor (A - this was the learner who also identified this person for her employer interview).
- Personal attributes or development previously identified as benefits of the programme of study, eg confidence, ability to achieve (B,C)
- Changes in the workplace of the cohort learners (F, G); one (F) described how her job disappeared and she

'became a priority mover overnight mid way through my programme which gave me lots of things to write about in my assignments, and for me as an individual I came out of the other end of that quite well. I'm told a lot of it was down to the positive attitude I showed, being proactive in the process...'

- No other factors identified (D, E).

F. Value for money

Most respondents found it difficult to recollect the exact cost of their studies. The financial cost of each programme would have varied according to the study dates, the number of modules studied, and the proportion of the programme that was accredited through AP(E)L. The price per 15 credit module was generally £150, making the cost of a 60 credit Professional Certificate £600. Credits awarded through AP(E)L cost half the fee.

- One learner (C) self-funded her entire programme, at the cost of circa £3,000.
- Three learners (B, F, G) were funded 100% by their employers.
- For two learners the employer paid circa 50%, with the other 50% self-funded.
- One learner paid 25% course fees, his employer 75%.

All respondents felt that it had been a good use of their time, because:

- Had flexibility in dictating their own pace of work (A, B, C)
- Benefited employer, self and students (D)
- Provided an opportunity to update and be reskilled (E)
- Became a better performer and more confident (F, G)
- Able to get APL on next level programme for modules already studied (G)

Four respondents (A, C, F, G) had no evidence whether or not their employer thought it had been good use of their time and value for money. (F) and (G) noted that, although their employer had commissioned the initial module of their programme, their learning and development had never been evaluated; they themselves both believed it had been value for money for the employer.

Three respondents believed that their employer did think it had been a good use of their time and value for money (B, D, E).

Several respondents were already engaged on further higher level study. Three were undertaking study at Master's level (A, B, D), two of whom (A, B) intended to proceed to Doctoral level studies. (B) regretted undertaking a conventional rather than work based Master's programme as

'I have ended up doing things that has no relevance whatsoever to my job. Doing what I do all day you don't want to go home and do something that is completely different and that you often don't see the point in.'

The other two individual learners (C, E), both graduates, were both considering study at Masters level; for (C) it would have to be a similarly flexible programme.

The two cohort learners (F, G) had both been selected by their employing organisation for a Foundation Degree programme, and had found out that the 60 credits gained through their previous programme would be accredited to their FD, thereby reducing by 25% the number of new modules they will be required to study. However, (F) felt that the same mistakes had been made in terms of lack of employer support as with the previous programme, but that she and (G) were now better prepared for this and, moreover, able to help support their colleagues through setting up a peer network.

G. Other

Several respondents reiterated or expanded upon points they had made in earlier sections:

'I think (work based learning) is a very good, sound way to study and I think it can complement a lot of the existing courses and modules that we have. Not replace, but complement, and if you had an option of this in each part of the curriculum, I think people would benefit enormously. You just don't get this chance through normal conventional courses.' (A)

'I've regretted not doing a work-based Masters within weeks of starting it but I was convinced into doing it because of the title and I thought that was what I would have to do to get my Chartership' (B)

'Doing the four (L1) modules initially does give you the opportunity to find out whether you really do have it in you to learn, and whether you can write, whether you can read – starting again is like learning a foreign language when you have never done any studying for many years. It has been an extremely valuable and worthwhile experience.' (C)

'(Tutors) put together a very, very good programme...OK, very taxing, very hard, no favours given. I found it beneficial and I would recommend it.' (D)

'Other than the fact that I was very impressed by the way that the department worked and how supported I felt – I think I've said that previously, particularly because I'd never undertaken any formal study for so many years.' (E)

(F) and (G) again spoke about a perceived lack of on-programme support from their employer, and commented that the same experience seemed to be being repeated on their current programme of study. The significance in these circumstances of the role of the HE tutor, and of being able to make use of peer support to sustain motivation, were again emphasised. (See Case Study 2)

Employer perspectives

A. Context

As discussed more fully in the Methodology section, there were several difficulties in identifying who was to represent 'the employer' in terms of someone in a position to speak about the impact of the programme of study. Even in cases where the learner was still working for the same organisation, internal events such as restructuring and changes in personnel meant that it was not always possible to interview anyone who had been involved with the individual or the programme at the time. This was notably the case with the cohort learners (F, G) and with one of the individual learners (D). Another individual learner (A) nominated an individual who was interviewed but found not to be in a position to speak on behalf of the employer.

Two of the employers interviewed (1, 3) were still the same line managers as when their employees (B, E) had undertaken their programmes of study. The other two were employer representatives with responsibility for organisational training, one of whom had been closely involved with the programme of study (2), and one of whom – the cohort employer – had not (4).

Employee	Current line manager	Organisational training manager	Employer representative	Individual identified not	Employer
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			unavailable	appropriate	
A				✓	n/a
B	✓				1
C		✓			2
D			✓		n/a
E	✓				3
F		✓			4
G		✓			4

Three of the employers interviewed (1, 3, 4) were heads of teams or departments in large, complex organisations. They estimated total numbers of their organisations' employees to be circa 1200, 1000 and 3500, respectively, and their own teams or areas of responsibility to have employed circa 24, 15 and 1000, respectively, at the time that the employees undertook the programmes of study. Responses to the question about organisational structure gave overviews ranging from the very general;

'Ministers - senior civil servants, who have permanent secretary - two more tiers of senior civil servants and then about five tiers probably below that (4)

to the very specific:

'One ward manager managed two wards, staff moved between the two; part of the old directorate which included the day unit and the Older Person's link community team; was a Service Manager, Head of Service and then an Assistant Director that covered all the services' (3).

This question would perhaps have benefited from being more clearly focused to get data that could be directly compared and related to the purpose of this study.

The organisation of fourth employer interviewed (2) was much smaller, with 30 employees at their head office but a workforce of up to 185 franchisees (who technically are self-employed).

One of the organisations was involved in the education sector, one in health and fitness and one in health; one was part of the civil service.

B. Motivation

All of the employer respondents thought that it was good for their organisation to support employees' ongoing learning and development, and that it was important for the organisation to demonstrate a commitment to doing so. The motives given included:

- Being able to respond to continuous change in the sector (1)
- Being in the organisation's interest for employees to further their knowledge (2)
- More trained staff being more motivated, more skilled and more able at managing their workload (3)
- Leading by example and being a good and responsible employer (4).

Organisations reported demonstrating their strategic commitment to learning and development through strategic plans and statements (1, 4); by having developed opportunities with an HE provider (2); or through a yearly business plan and partly through PDP processes with staff (3).

C. Needs

Responses from three of the four employers indicated that they had not been clear over specific needs to be fulfilled by their employees undertaking the programmes of study. One (1) expanded generally on how the organisation aimed to match staff development and the recognition of needs to the departmental strategy and business plan, and identified the importance of the employee being able to apply their learning in the workplace:

'You can be knowledgeable about something and not know how to apply that knowledge, not know how to take yourself forward...I think that's where the work-based thing comes in. It was using an enthusiasm and a knowledge and a skill to mature it out into something that could be developed more. It's within individual skill sets and professional understanding that the department moves forward – it's how this sector is.' (1)

The smaller franchising employer had been concerned that if their franchisees became very committed to further study, this might distract them from commitment to the business; this had to be balanced alongside the knowledge that, *'If someone comes to us with a degree...they have the intellectual ability to be able to run a very successful business.'* (2)

The cohort employer knew little about the specific programme that had been undertaken but did state that, *'we were very clear then and still are that leadership is one of our prime skills gaps'*, and that the in-house programme, subsequently developed and accredited by the HE provider, had been designed in response to this need (4).

D. Programme of study

In two cases (1, 3) the programme of study had been chosen by the employee themselves. Employer (2) had previous knowledge of the work of the HE provider and liked the flexibility of the work based learning approach. Employer (4) was unable to say why they had chosen to work with the particular HE provider, other than that there appeared to be links at national level; she did note, however, that the employees themselves had made the choice to extend their study beyond the initial accredited module to undertake further modules towards a qualification, because it had seemed relevant.

In three out of four cases, no other options were reported to have been considered. Employer (1) did discuss another provider (the OU) with their employee but the local and more flexible option was preferred.

Two employers (1, 2) reported an involvement in the design, delivery or assessment of the programme, two (3, 4) reported not, to the best of their knowledge. However, this question could be seen to be slightly ambiguous and employer (3) did report elsewhere discussing and agreeing negotiated projects, for example, with his employee. Employer (1) identified that, whilst not having been involved in the overall design of the programme, he had been able to engage with his employee in discussion and planning of how the project work to be undertaken could benefit them both. In this way, the investment in study time led to a direct pay back for the employer:

'I think there were many aspects, as B was going through it, in choosing the ways he wanted to take projects forward or take the recognition for some of the work he was doing and have it credited, there was a bit of discussion of how we may want to use it for the benefit of both sides. So there were certain things we were doing at that time in our development that he was central to that he could, by us agreeing to him investing his time for this programme, we would both get a win.' (1)

Employer (2) had been directly involved with the HE in creating and delivering the four initial module studies, then had a clear input into the design of the subsequent degree programme.

Employer (4) reported that the organisation had not been involved in the design of the programme; however, the initial module from which accreditation was developed had originally been designed and delivered entirely in-house. This highlights the complexities of trying to pin down and evaluate some of the 'messier' aspects of working with employers to respond to need and design or accredit provision; the stages are not always straightforward or tidy either to establish or to report.

In terms of support, the employers confirmed the nature and extent of support indicated by the employees. Employer (2) reiterated their general concern that franchisees should not study at the expense of time committed to the business, but in the case of employee (C) had been very supportive, and had some involvement with the assessment process. However, as (C) was not an employee, but a franchisee, the company had been unable to give study time. With regard to the funding provided by employer (4), for the later modules the employees were funded by their own sections, rather than centrally, with no other kind of support from the employer.

Three employers were very clear and positive that the programme of study had met or exceeded their needs, in terms of returns from the employee:

'What I didn't realise was the programme directly matching what he wanted to do but rounding him with a tool set that more than paid dividend back into his other work. He used the skills that he was having to do in various assessments etc. to then change the way he worked which I wasn't expecting. It was a huge benefit.' (1)

Employer (4) was unable to comment other than to express confidence in the employees' ability thereby to benefit from further study.

E. Benefits and impact

One employer (1) stressed the benefits resulting from the discipline of reflection on experience through the structure of the programme of study being transferred to the workplace: *'...it broadened out his understanding from being purely technical to being this much wider view on life'*. Employer (3) also valued this aspect:

'I think it gave her an insight as well into the problems that we were having at that time – it gave her an overall picture of what was happening, so it increased her knowledge of the situation.'

For employer (2) the benefit was that it enabled employee (C) to remain with the company and progress to a new role. Employer (4) also felt that having undertaken their programme of study had improved the employees and would benefit them in terms of potential promotion.

Employer views on how their organisations had benefited varied. Employer (1) was emphatic about (B)'s increase in throughput and quality of work as a result of undertaking his programme. For employer (2) the benefit to the company came through the recognition and endorsement of its support for training, thereby enhancing its reputation in comparison to its competitors. Employer (3) acknowledged the likely contribution of (E)'s research to a wider review of the service. Employer (4) highlighted the difficulty of isolating the influence played by that particular programme of study within the wider package of ongoing development.

F. Value for money

All employers were vague on the financial cost of the programme, and in one case was not sure who had provided the funding (3). Two employers (1, 2) thought that the HE courses had been very good value for money, particularly compared to commercial professional training courses (1). The other two employers (3, 4) agreed, although with less certainty over the actual costs, that the programmes were value for money.

Two employers (1, 4) were definite that they would consider higher level study for employees in future. The other two (2, 3) were also keen in principle, but had reservations about the time commitment required, whether from the individual or from the company.

G. Other

Employers reported some other links with HE, but only one (3) had similarly formal links with other providers. Employer (4) had

'...a lot of people who do Masters, MBAs and other areas of probably postgraduate study which are supported by the department...But we don't as a generalisation deliver higher education stuff on the department's premises, designed internally.'

All employers were extremely positive in their general support for work based learning programmes, not least because of the benefits which they had seen for their employees:

'If I look back it has been a transformation.' (1)

'I'd love to see more going through to fruition because I've seen the pleasure that (C)'s got from it – it has been a real goal in her life to achieve it.' (2)

'Overall positive – any managers could encourage that on a higher education and development side and feel responsible but it's just ensuring that you can accommodate it and like any service training stretches staffing - even statutory training. It's quite a luxury to be able to enable somebody to access something of that nature.' (3)

'My general opinion is that I am very strongly in favour of work-based study. I think it is easier for students to undertake, if they have been at work for quite a long time, maybe never did A Levels, and certainly haven't done them recently, its much easier for them to get into the groove of understanding what academic rigor means because there is still a link to their work so therefore it is not 100% new. It's putting on the academic side to something that they are already familiar and confident with. And, much more directly relevant to the employer.' (4)

Overall analysis

There can be difficulties, for commercial or political reasons, in retrospectively engaging employers of cohorts of learners in evaluation and research.

Identifying and contacting an appropriate employer representative retrospectively can also be problematic in the case of self-employed learners, or where there has been organisational restructuring, or where the learner does not wish a former employer to be contacted. It can therefore be difficult to find reliable and valid sources of employer evidence through this approach. The wish to obtain reliable and consistent 'evidence from employers' needs to be set alongside an acknowledgement that this is not always easily achievable, or the evidence obtained readily generalisable.

The most frequently reported factor in employee self-motivation was 'to open up new opportunities for career progression and promotion'. Learners had a general, rather than specific, sense of career path.

Learners needs and expectations of the programmes varied, but several learners mention wanting structure through which to gain 'knowledge', 'learning' or 'understanding' in relation to work. Discussions with employers had mostly been informal.

The main reasons for choosing the programme and provider were flexibility, particularly in terms of choice of modules, attendance and the period in which studies could be completed; locality; and existing links with the provider. The model of academic learning linked to practice in the workplace was attractive.

Some learners had started their programme of study by undertaking single modules or smaller staged chunks of credit that then counted as building blocks towards the work based learning qualification for which they later registered. These initial credits are not treated here as the highest qualification when the programme was begun, but as part of the overall qualification programme. Others imported a substantial amount of APEL from other sources. Both of these practices were important in engaging work based learners and facilitating their progression.

For all learners the programmes either met or exceeded their expectations, to the extent that these had been clear or specified. The role of the HE tutor, both in motivation and in academic support, was seen as crucial.

For most learners some support and encouragement from the line manager seems to be an important factor. Some, however, are very independent and self-motivating and can study successfully without this; for one, the lack of employer support was a motivating factor in achieving the means to change employment. The cohort learners compensated for what they felt was lack of employer support by self-organised 'peer support' sessions.

The reflection based aspects of work based learning, linked to practical experiences activities in the workplace, are highly valued by the learners and employers alike.

The two cohort learners each took a very different approach to their recorded interview, one contributing much more detailed and sometimes critical comments, although when speaking informally both were in agreement about their experiences.

7. IMPACT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Impact

- (i) The evidence from these interviews is that the benefits of work based learning extend beyond the purely technical or narrowly vocational or role specific. They can be described as capability-extending in terms of attitudes and approaches to work, including a wider awareness of the 'bigger picture'. The impact is on employees' generic capabilities - self-awareness, ability to think and question, and confidence in their performance at work - rather than on functional updating, and the value of this in contributing to improved quality of work is recognised by employers as well as the employees themselves.
- (ii) Employers were supportive of the facility offered by work based learning programmes to integrate study with practical projects of benefit to the organisation.
- (iii) Professional benefits to individuals could also be seen in that more than half of the employees interviewed had changed job or gained promotion helped, they felt, by having undertaken the programme of study.
- (iv) The majority of learners have progressed to further higher level study, establishing a pattern as lifelong learners.

Recommendations

- (i) There should be clear recognition that the benefit of higher level education, as offered through negotiated or customised work based learning programmes, extends beyond the acquisition of role specific skills or knowledge to the development of generic capabilities, understanding and approaches that benefit both employer and employee. Consideration should be given to promoting wider awareness of these benefits, as distinct from the more role-specific aspects of commercial and professional education and training.
- (ii) When considering impact and implications for further research, it is important to bear in mind the terms of reference of this study and the limitations that this may impose on conclusions that can be drawn. For example, only successful learners were interviewed; retention on work based learning programmes is often poor and the impact of study on those who withdraw, whether positive or negative, is unknown. It is likely that in this category of ex-learners there will be those for whom the programme of study did not meet their needs or expectations. Conversely, their studies may have had a positive impact despite not being completed, but this is not known. This data will be more difficult to research but is nonetheless needed in order to give the full picture of impact of work based learning.

- (iii) Also, only learners with a positive relationship with their employer will agree for their employer to be interviewed; where the relationship is less good, employer impact may have been affected, but the data would not be available for consideration, so no conclusions in these cases would be limited. A different approach, therefore, may need to be considered in future research into the employer perspective.
- (iv) In-house programmes linked to assessment for HE accreditation need to be well-integrated and learners clearly advised by the employer on the commitment and expectations. Employers should take an ongoing interest in the experience and progress of employees undertaking programmes of study.
- (v) To be able to gather a range of data on the impact of work based learning programmes designed for specific cohorts, the question of evaluation needs to be raised with employer early in the negotiation process. In the case of the cohort interviewed in this study, there was no evidence of evaluation of impact having been undertaken by the employer commissioning the initial module of the programme. As has already been noted, other employers were either unwilling to participate in the study for reasons of internal confidentiality (and in this instance because they had already commissioned extensive evaluation for themselves) or were not pressured to participate for reasons involving commercial sensitivities. Establishing with the employer the benefits of an evaluation phase as part of the basic initial agreement or understanding between the HE provider and the employer would establish this as an expectation, rather than an exercise for which cooperation was requested post hoc.

8. CASE STUDIES

Please see attached for Case Studies 1 and 2.

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