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Facilitating Employer Engagement Through Negotiated Work Based Learning: a case study from the University of Chester

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Foreword

Universities and colleges are engaging with employers in ways that are deeper and stronger than ever before. This change in culture and business focus has been gathering pace since the turn of the millennium, encouraged by the Lambert (2003) and Leitch (2006) reports and development funding from the Higher Education Funding Council. Perhaps more importantly, both employers and universities are finding that there are significant mutual benefits which flow from collaboration to improve organisational performance by developing people. This case study is presented as a unique exemplar of such a collaborative relationship between the University of Chester and the Pension, Disability and Carers Service (PDCS), an agency of the Department for Work and Pensions – and illustrates well the challenges it has presented to both organisations, together with the potentially very significant impact that has been achieved in the delivery of a key public service.

Many people will have formed their views of higher education as a result of their experiences as undergraduates. This means that often we are unaware of the changes in the practice of teaching and learning or the degree of flexibility and responsiveness that higher education practitioners can apply to meeting the needs of employers and employees. What is striking about this case study is that the University started not with a course or qualification it wanted to ‘sell’, but with the development of a detailed understanding of the operational issues of PDCS and the needs of its staff making decisions on entitlement to disability benefits. It also approached this task with an academic framework that allowed for a flexible response to the issues.

PDCS sought higher education help with an investment in its people which would bring benefits to staff, customers and stakeholders alike. Working together to arrive at a solution, both PDCS and the University recognised what was already achieved in decision maker training and developed the ‘Professionalism in Decision Making and Appeals’ programme to build on this. The programme captured key business elements and the development of critical thinking skills. The University responded flexibly to PDCS requirements by supporting an approach in which people could progress as they grew in experience and expertise, recognising their abilities to undertake more demanding work.

The benefits to PDCS have been significant in terms of improved service delivery to customers in this key area and improved confidence amongst the people responsible for delivering that service, although there is much more to do on extending this approach to all decision makers. The benefits to the University of Chester have been the development and proving of a flexible and responsive approach which embeds the highest academic standards, but applies them in an essentially non-academic environment.

We recommend this report as a resource for both higher education practitioners and managers of public services as an exemplar of service improvement through people development.

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Introduction

For over 20 years, the University of Chester has been adopting approaches to curriculum development that have involved developing the means to accredit learning that occurs in and through the workplace.

This initially involved creating pioneering work based placement modules for full-time undergraduate students studying a range of disciplines, then latterly the development of an accreditation framework for work based and work related learning, aimed at adult learners in the workplace. This framework – Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) – has since enabled the University to engage with organisations for the purpose of accrediting learning associated with personal and professional development at work, whether that be at undergraduate or postgraduate levels.

This report is intended to explain the development of this framework, identify its key features and situate them within the context of the drive towards employer engagement in higher education (HE) in the 21st century. It examines the negotiation process inherent in such frameworks, involving negotiation by universities with both individual students and employing organisations. In particular, it uses a case study approach to highlight examples from the civil service – notably including a case study from the Pension, Disability and Carers Service (PDCS) – of how such engagement can assist the processes of individual development and organisational change required in a modern economy.

The report also discusses issues associated with how negotiated work based learning (WBL) frameworks may be developed more widely by the higher education sector, and used more systematically by employers, to the benefit of both.

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Negotiated Work Based Learning Frameworks in HE

Negotiated Work Based Learning frameworks (sometimes called work based learning accreditation frameworks) arose slowly and unevenly, developing from a number of influences in HE and from government in the 1980s and 1990s. One of these was the ‘capability movement’ and its view that in many respects an artificial divide existed between education and training, and that higher education should be concerned with more than the pursuit of intellectual skills and subject-specific knowledge. Instead, HE should be about a broad range of purposes and issues that enable graduates to be effective in their personal, social and working lives.

When this perspective became combined with other influences – notably the self-managed and independent learning tradition (especially for adults) that had become established in HE, and also the growth of experiential learning in HE more generally – it was to form an approach that has over time metamorphosed into the negotiated work based learning frameworks that exist in modern HE today. This was most clearly the case at Middlesex University, where capability focused education and negotiated adult learning fused to produce one of the largest frameworks of its kind, an approach since applied and developed by other UK universities that have been involved in the University for Industry’s *Learning through Work* initiative, most notably Derby, Chester, Northumbria, Teesside and Portsmouth.

Since the millennium the significance of these frameworks has grown, with the student body being numbered in the hundreds if not thousands at the higher education institutions (HEIs) concerned. Increasingly, others in the HE sector are now seeking to develop and apply the flexibility they offer students and organisations alike. These frameworks, while

differing in detail, have a number of common features to their approach worth identifying. Most notably, they include:

- A recognition that the **workplace itself is a valuable site of knowledge generation**, in addition to the knowledge generation that takes place in and through more formal educational institutions and mechanisms.
- The importance of **critical reflection** as an intellectual and practical tool, challenging assumptions, encouraging new perspectives and assisting the development of personal and professional practice.
- Facilitation of **widening access and participation (WAP)** opportunities, enabling adult learners in the workplace to access higher education opportunities that might not otherwise have been available to them.
- Allowing learners to take much of the **responsibility** for their own learning, including its nature, and within certain parameters, its focus and pace.
- **Negotiability of learning**, both at a programme level and at the level of individual modules such as work based projects. This negotiation can occur between the university and individual student, between the university and an organisation, or both.
- A focus on awarding **academic credit for work based and work related learning**, enabling academic reward to be given for learning that arises experientially in the workplace as well as learning which is applied in the workplace.
- Emphasising opportunities for the **accreditation of prior learning (APL)**, both experiential (APEL) and certificated (APCL), with the expectation that credit for prior learning is likely to be the norm in such frameworks rather than the exceptional and marginal activity it often is elsewhere.
- The centrality of **capability** as a goal, through the enhancement of personal and professional development alongside the fostering of more 'conventional' or 'traditional' academic skills.
- Provision for **accrediting work based programmes** not originally situated within HE, but designed and delivered 'in-house' rather than directly by the HE sector itself.

Negotiated work based learning frameworks typically exhibit most if not all of these features, although their precise application and details can vary from institution to institution (for instance, some HEIs have tended to specialise in facilitation of negotiated WBL at distance; also, the degree of flexibility offered by HEIs in terms of assignment submission deadlines and so on, can vary considerably).



Negotiated WBL Frameworks and Employer Engagement

This underpinning philosophy of negotiated WBL is something that organisations find appealing, providing as it does flexible, relevant and reflective learning experiences for individuals and collectives of learners alike. Indeed, the considerable expansion of these frameworks in the last decade is accounted for, in large part, by their attractiveness to employers. Bespoke pathways of study can be accredited in a straightforward manner, and in most of the WBL frameworks opportunity exists to accredit specialised in-house training designed and delivered by organisations. This represents an ‘added value’ for organisations seeking to work with the HE sector and a sharing of knowledge and experiences that can be productive for all concerned.

In recent years, public sector bodies – most obviously the National Health Service (NHS), civil service, armed forces, and local government – have been enthusiastic participants in this type of engagement and private sector businesses are also engaging positively (particularly training, consultancy and coaching organisations, together with small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and some larger-scale enterprises).

These programmes’ work based and flexible nature means that they are also consistent with much that the government and its agencies have sought to promote in recent years, particularly at the interface of higher education and employer engagement. In many respects learning implies change, and knowing why this is happening and how it can be harnessed is vital in a modern economy; this is something negotiated WBL is transparently designed to address.

The Leitch Review (2006) identified the importance of the responsiveness of higher education to the learning needs of the workforce and to the demand-led nature of provision. These are the very reasons that negotiated WBL frameworks were developed in HE and they could not be more fit for purpose in today’s climate, which finds HE needing to proactively respond to government imperatives to engage more closely with employers

and focus much more on the skills needs of the UK workforce. Over time, Dearing (1997), Lambert (2003), the White Paper *The Future of Higher Education* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) and Leitch (2006), together with a series of recent reports by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), have articulated precisely the same concerns regarding the need for HE to be more responsive to the needs of the UK economy and society in general. In addition, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills and HEFCE have made it clear that, while they continue to support conventionally delivered HE, much of the additional monies which are available through 'third stream' sources will be aimed at supporting activities concerned with employer engagement. In particular, HEFCE, through its Strategic Development Fund and additional student numbers for foundation degrees (FDs) and continuing professional development, has been offering incentives for universities to focus their attention on employer engagement and work based learning.

It is in this context and in response to these political drivers that negotiated WBL frameworks seek to engage responsively with organisations and the needs of the wider community, helping to develop a 'community of practice' where possible, involving individual participants, organisations and higher education. As burgeoning recruitment on negotiated WBL frameworks has shown, there is certainly a huge existing – and potential – market for this type of HE provision. The Work Based and Integrative Studies framework at Chester alone has seen its student numbers rise from less than a dozen at the turn of the millennium to over 1,000 today, growth mirrored at other HEIs with similar provision, such as Derby.



The Work Based and Integrative Studies Framework at Chester

The negotiated WBL framework which was developed at the University of Chester is called Work Based and Integrative Studies, and this name reflects the nature of the framework itself:

- 'work based' because it allows students to access academic credit for their learning at work, and
- 'integrative studies' because students are typically able to integrate relevant taught work related modules (from the University's 'bank' of modules) into their negotiated pathway of learning.

WBIS was first validated in 1998 with the clear intention of providing a facilitative framework for academic awards in negotiated work based or work related studies. It was constructed so that it could be accessed by all faculties and departments where there was a need for flexibility in terms of the composition of a learning route and/or its mode of delivery. This remains an intention of the framework today.

It is a framework with two programmes – the undergraduate modular programme and the postgraduate modular programme – currently providing an accreditation mechanism for work based and work related learning for National Qualifications Framework (NQF) levels 4-7. Awards range from 60-credit short awards to full Bachelor's and Master's degrees.

The framework's programmes have a modular structure designed to enable participants to construct routes ('approved studies') that reflect their current, future or potential interests and aspirations. They are intended to be flexible and to give optimum credit for learning undertaken in relation to participants' personal and professional development and, wherever possible, as part of their everyday work. Students can typically negotiate their own award title, with the proviso that it relates to their area of working practice and that the modules they choose to undertake as part of their approved study route are cognate with this award.

As a programme of study proceeds, learners develop and use skills associated with experiential work-based learning such as project planning, delivery and completion. They may also study modules that are selected for their relevance to the individual's learning needs, including taught work related modules accredited within the WBIS framework or already validated in other programmes offered by the University.

While in many disciplines there is attention given to reflective practice and the application of theory, these capabilities are crucial in the context of WBIS programmes.

Throughout a WBIS programme of study the consideration of workplace practice is essential, and students develop the ability to inform their personal and professional development through engagement with a wide range of sources, including the experiences of others and relevant models and theories. The research base for WBIS students is wide and varied, requiring strategic selection and the validation of 'thinking and doing' in a workplace context.

While WBIS is essentially an accreditation framework, specific pre-validated modules have been written for the programmes within the framework and these generally relate to the need to help students plan and contextualise negotiated work based and work related learning opportunities. These modules typically form the key components of a WBIS negotiated route and include:

- **Self Review and Negotiation of Learning** (all levels), where students engage in a process of personal review and then negotiate an outline learning pathway ('approved studies') based on their personal and professional development needs. This is typically the first module a student will take on their WBIS study route, enabling them to engage in the process of programme planning, typically including the formulation of a claim for the accreditation of prior learning.
- **Skills and Approaches for Work Based Learning** (all levels), a module which is designed to help prepare the ground for work-based experiential learning and the accumulation of academic credit for this purpose. It is typically taken after the Self Review module.
- **Work Based Research Methods** (Levels 6 and 7 only), which helps students prepare for research projects in the workplace, being mandatory for all students on full Master's degree programmes. At Master's level, this module is usually taken just before the significant research project which finishes a full MA or MSc programme of study.
- **Exit Review and Forward Planning** (all levels), where appropriate, typically taken by students at the end of their WBIS approved studies pathway. This module encourages students to reflect on their programme of study as a whole, look at how they have developed personally and professionally, and then plan for future opportunities and career progression in the light of this.

In addition, two types of generic, pre-validated 'template' modules exist at all levels:

- **Negotiated experiential learning modules (NELMs)** which give credit for work-based learning and project work. Learning is driven by workplace practice and experiences and students customise generic learning outcomes with their own specific ones negotiated with their tutor, also having the opportunity to negotiate appropriate module assessment.
- **WBIS taught work related modules** which are specialist modules commissioned and designed on a collaborative basis by organisations and individuals working with the University, according to demand, and which are aimed at increasing vocational knowledge and competence in specific areas of learning. This learning is typically led by taught input, which is applied in the workplace and reflected upon. These work related modules exist as generic 'templates' which can be specifically customised at each level of study. Organisations, students and other interested parties may negotiate the content, assessment and learning strategies. The customised versions of these template modules are presented to – and authorised for use by – the University's WBIS Approval Panel.

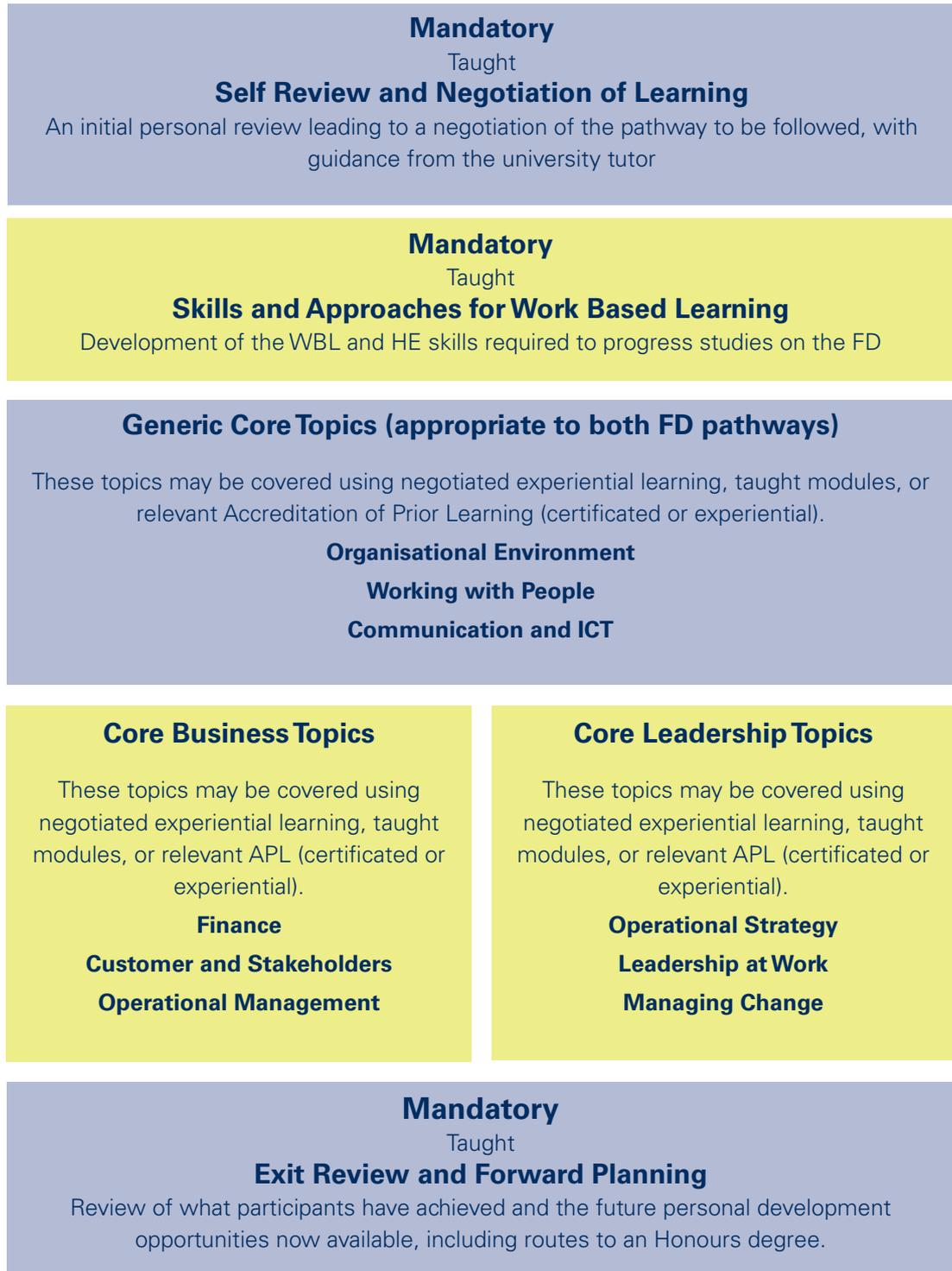
In relation to this provision, the validation of the WBIS framework allows the University's WBIS Approval Panel to specifically authorise:

- (i) customisations of the WBIS taught work related modules, and;
- (ii) negotiated approved studies, which may include the types of module listed above and also modules from relevant, existing validated programmes (the University of Chester 'bank' of modules).

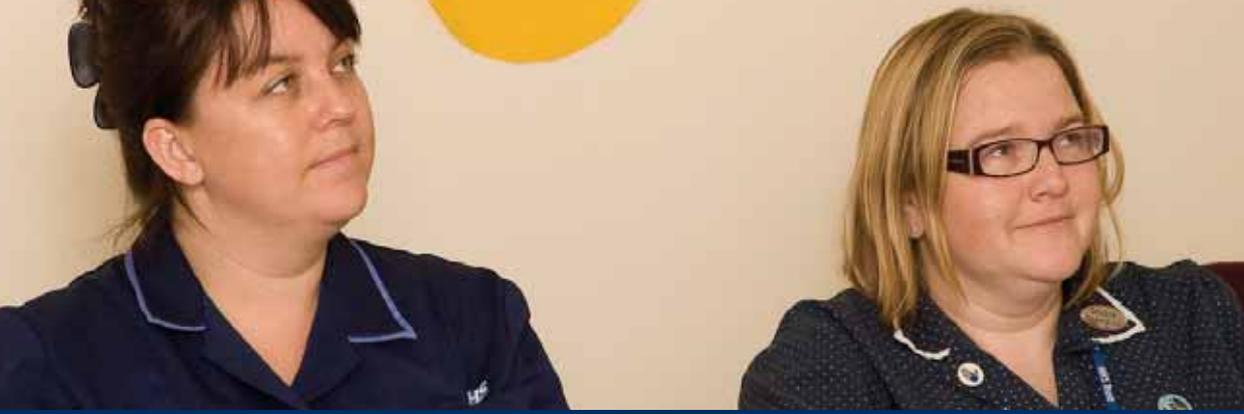
It is in this way that the University can both allow individually negotiated study routes through WBIS, and also design HE provision which is negotiated principally with organisations and which, from the point of view of the student, is a more prescribed and pre-set study route (these routes often involve the accreditation of existing in-house training). On occasion these two general approaches can be blended, with students needing to study certain pre-agreed modules or topic areas, but with flexibility of choice and possibly approach (e.g. whether to address a topic through APL, a NELM, a relevant taught work related module, etc). This is an approach that has recently been taken with the foundation degree for the RAF, developed with a consortium of HEIs involving Derby, the Open University and Staffordshire as well as Chester (Lucas, Minton and Perrin, 2007).

It is an approach demonstrated in Figure 1:

Figure 1



NB: In addition to this basic structure, each HEI provides its own supplementary topics for each pathway (e.g. at Chester: Conflict Transformation, Mentoring, Stress Management, Negotiation Skills, Transition and Change Management, etc).



The WBIS Model in Practice (1): Individually Negotiated Learning

The majority of WBIS students at Chester, whether undergraduate or postgraduate, negotiate their own individual pathway of learning.

Some of these students are individuals working in organisations where they are the only WBIS student, or are perhaps among a very small number of WBIS students who have also negotiated their own individual study routes. Significant numbers of others exist in large cohorts (such as with Wirral NHS Trust), even though each student still negotiates their own particular study route.

The starting point for a student taking this individually negotiated approach to their learning is the initial Self Review and Negotiation of Learning module. This is the 'programme planning' module, and also serves as an introduction to the processes and practices of critical reflection an approach which runs like a thread through programmes of negotiated WBL and which is a vital skill on WBIS.

This reflective, personal review process encourages students to think about their background, values and beliefs, together with their knowledge and skills, in a way that can identify possible future areas for development. This then leads to a consideration of how their WBIS programme of study can be tailored to their individual needs, identifying opportunities for accreditation of prior learning (any existing certificated learning and potential claims for prior experiential learning), any work based projects they may be engaging with in the workplace, and any relevant taught modules (whether delivered face to face or principally online) they may wish to include in their negotiated study route.

As part of the assessment for the Self Review and Negotiation of Learning module, students have to identify and articulate a rationale for their chosen learning route. This must include a clear identification of their award title and a justification for this, e.g.:

- a network administrator in a local SME may elect to choose BSc (Hons) Computer Science (WBIS) as an award title.

- a ward manager in the NHS may, for instance, choose an MA in Managing and Leading in the Health Service (WBIS).

In addition, students are required to identify the modules they wish to undertake and provide an explanation of why they are appropriate and how they relate to the award title chosen.

A Master's level case study can illustrate this process practically.

Ursula is a senior civil servant who has worked across a range of government departments, including in a training role. With a wealth of experience as a leader and manager, she has never had the opportunity to study for a Master's degree or gain any recognition academically for the work she has done preparing guidance for Ministers and senior civil servants. Completing a traditional Master's degree in addition to her day-in-day-out workload was something she always viewed as an impossibility, though combining elements of the two together with a work based approach seemed a viable way forward. She also has a desire to write a significant report in an area of working practice that she hopes could transform attitudes and approaches to change management.

As part of her initial Self Review and Negotiation of Learning module she found herself being asked to write reflectively for the first time. Her approach was to examine the attitudes to leadership and management she had adopted in an earlier career, discussing the influence played by a former manager and how this had informed her approach on first joining the civil service. This prompted much useful reflection on her personal and professional development, her changing role in the civil service and her attitudes towards organisational change.

The self review process also identified a potentially appropriate negotiated learning route which was discussed with her employers. Ursula had devised and written a key handbook for civil servants working with government ministers; this had undergone many iterations and been developed over time with input from stakeholders. Various drafts had been produced, chapters had been reviewed by colleagues and eventually a handbook produced. This was to form the basis of a significant claim for prior learning (in this case the maximum amount of APL allowable, amounting to half the credit needed for a full Master's degree), which comprised a contextualising critically reflective commentary, plus evidence of the learning claimed for in an appendix of supporting materials.

This was important, as it allowed Ursula to claim credit for a major project that had involved her engaging in Master's Level thinking, but also allowed her in the reflective commentary to examine the approaches taken to this work and their wider ramifications for senior civil servants. In feedback, Ursula claimed that she found both the Self Review and Negotiation of Learning process – and the APEL claim which arose from it – as a positive and 'empowering' experience that she would recommend to others.

So, in this instance, the self review process went through the following stages:

- initial personal review (assumptions analysis, skills audit, identification of personal and professional development opportunities, etc)
- identification of an appropriate award title (Public Sector Management)
- identification of APEL opportunities
- negotiation of individual learning route.

Ursula is currently at the stage whereby she is completing her Research Methods module, which will prepare her for her final research project (a quadruple module and the equivalent of a work based dissertation). Her Research Methods assignment has included identifying a relevant work based research project with an appropriate methodology and research plan that can provide a significant learning opportunity while assisting work place practice.

Ursula's negotiated study route is therefore:

- Self Review and Negotiation of Learning (15 credits)
- APEL claim for learning associated with handbook production (90 credits)
- Research Methods for WBL (15 credits)
- Research-based NELM (60 credits).

This leads to the negotiated award of MA in Public Sector Management (WBIS), relevant to both her area of working practice and the individual learning route assembled in negotiation with her tutor. In this way, the student has been able to choose an award title that is relevant and meaningful to both herself and her employing organisation, while gaining academic reward for a range of her learning experiences (both past and present) while also being able to engage in significant research that can have an impact on future work-place practice.

Not all students have the opportunity to be able to claim the maximum amount of APEL as in this example. However most students on individually negotiated routes are able to access a genuinely blended experience through:

- claiming APEL where possible and relevant,
- taking appropriate taught modules, and
- gaining reward for current and future work-based projects.

Ursula (postgraduate student):

'I've been greatly impressed by the professionalism and enthusiasm of my tutors: their accessibility, practical helpfulness and willingness to read and comment on drafts at various stages of production. For me, APEL was a particular blessing, enabling me to submit a book I'd written for part of the assessment, which after rigorous scrutiny by my tutors, helped gain me credits amounting to half my final qualification'.

By contrast, an outline study route for another Master's level student, who chose to take more work-related taught modules as an aid to personal and professional development, is included overleaf (Figure 2), also reflecting a recent move to a 20 credit modular structure:

Figure 2:

APPROVED STUDIES LEARNING AGREEMENT

Name of student <i>A. Grey</i>	Address <i>102, Upper Bridge St., Chester</i>
Registration number <i>X40823</i> Tel no:

Name of employer <i>Local authority</i>	Address Tel no:
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Name of Personal Academic Tutor/UC negotiator	<i>G. Wood</i>
Title of WBIS exit award	<i>MA in Human Resource Management (WBIS)</i>
Level of study	<i>M Level (NQF level 7)</i>

	Module no	Module title and brief description of topic where applicable	Credit rating	Anticipated date of commencement of study
1	IS7 001	Self Review and Negotiation of Learning	20	3.2.07
2	AP(E)L	AP(E)L claim: Implementing 'Investors in People' within a local authority IT department	40	4.4.07
3	IS7148	Conflict Transformation	20	3.8.07
4	IS7113	Team Building and Leadership	20	30.10.07
5	IS7 002	Research Methods for WBL	20	5.1.08
6	IS7 020	NELM: Strategies for enhancing employee engagement within a local authority IT department.	60	4.4.08
		Total	180	

Student's signature..... Employer (where appropriate)

Date UC representative

On this occasion, the same process was undertaken but with an outcome that identified taught modules offered within the University that would be an aid to the student's personal and professional development. All of the chosen modules related to both the area of working practice and the chosen award title, and a smaller claim for APEL was submitted than in Ursula's case, partly because of the other future learning needs identified.

In both these instances, it can be seen that this approach genuinely situates the learner at the centre of their own learning experiences, devolving elements of the responsibility of curriculum design to students within a clear framework, with set parameters and with appropriate advice from experienced tutors.

Guidance from tutors concerning the options open to students negotiating their study routes is key, and not just at Master's level. It is especially so for undergraduate students and those entering the realm of higher education experiences for the first time.

Anne-Marie (undergraduate student):

'Learning through work allows you to set your own timescales and your own studying routine. You can also tailor your course around what you want to use it for, so it applies directly to your job. It isn't study for study's sake, it's study with a purpose. I didn't see the point of doing something that I couldn't then use.

The whole point of the exercise was to increase my skills – interpersonal, listening, communication and understanding skills. It's crystallised a lot of what I do and honed it. I've become far more analytical about evaluating what I'm learning and deciding what value it will have to my clients.

To do it in your own time, in your own subject, at your own pace, with fantastic support is really valuable.'



The WBIS Model in Practice (2): Cohort Negotiated Learning

The drive for universities to engage with employers to ensure appropriate skills development and knowledge transfer has led to burgeoning interest in negotiated WBL frameworks across a range of sectors: from large public service bodies such as the NHS, to niche-market SMEs. Such is the flexibility inherent in programmes like WBIS at Chester that there are a variety of ways in which HEIs with negotiated WBL frameworks can engage with organisations to customise learning pathways for students. The most typical ways in which this can happen are summarised below:

- An organisation can encourage individual learners to negotiate their own learning routes, but will typically ensure that certain pre-agreed topic areas can be offered to all eligible learners within the organisation. This is a model Chester and Wirral NHS Trust use, where students undertake individually negotiated study routes but where suites of taught work related modules are offered throughout the year for students to access; these are in topic areas of interest to the Trust and which reflect its internal personal and professional development imperatives for staff.
- The University can negotiate a study route for an organisation which is designed specifically to meet identifiable organisational needs and which presents itself to the student body as a (largely or entirely) prescribed study route which has been pre-agreed with the employer. Chester's Foundation for Government ('F4Gov') foundation degree for the civil service was originally designed in this way, with the curriculum being developed in negotiation with the Cabinet Office and other government departments. Such prescribed routes can be delivered wholly by the HEI, or by the HEI with assistance from the organisation concerned when key expert knowledge resides specifically in the workplace.
- The University can work to accredit in-house training provision which is delivered by the organisation concerned. The University may also help design (or redesign) such programmes and will typically enter into an arrangement whereby most of the delivery

is conducted by the client organisation, with the HEI performing the function of advisor and ensuring academic quality regarding the accredited aspects of the provision. In this instance, the HEI will also perform an important role in training tutors within the workplace so that they are able to efficiently and effectively teach and assess to HE standards.

This last arrangement often provides the most challenges for employers and HEIs alike, as it involves – within certain limits – delegation of some powers by universities and a different relationship to that evident in the vast majority of university-level engagement with the business community and public sector. To illustrate the benefits and issues associated with this way of working, it is useful to examine Chester’s involvement with the Pension, Disability and Carers Service of the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) by way of a case study.



Cohort Case Study:

Pension, Disability and Carers Service

The flexibility of the WBIS framework means that Chester can use it to facilitate learning and can create accreditation packages for specific organisations that are negotiated directly with those organisations. This can sometimes involve aspects of joint delivery. An example of this is the co-operation between Chester and the Pension, Disability and Carers Service (part of DWP) to develop a route for its decision makers (DMs). This route is known as 'Professionalism in Decision Making and Appeals', more commonly called 'PIDMA'. Since the pilot programme, deemed to be successful by both PDCS and Chester, it is now being strategically rolled out in PDCS.

The issue: capability and consistency in decision making

The Pension, Disability and Carers Service is an agency of the Department for Work and Pensions. Besides administering Retirement Pension and Pension Credit, the service pays benefits to 5 million disabled people and their carers, with three quarters of a million new claims to Disability Living Allowance (DLA) and Attendance Allowance (AA) every year, and it is these benefits which are the focus of PIDMA.

Decisions on entitlement to DLA and AA are made by professional decision makers in PDCS. Their role, with its heavy emphasis on considering customers' and medical and other evidence in determining needs, is unlike any other decision making role in DWP. It is a complex and highly skilled role and one which until 1992 had been undertaken by doctors. It demands high levels of considerative skills and disability knowledge. Over the years there has been external criticism about decision making on entitlement to benefit from customers, disability organisations and external auditors.

Criticisms have included inconsistency in decisions and decision makers having insufficient awareness of disability and customers' needs. Customers have the right to go to appeal over decisions and the volume of these appeals has been significant. However, there are millions of disabled people receiving an important disability benefit (DLA/AA) as a result of decision makers undertaking their role well.

Understandably, most of the emphasis in decision maker initial training has been on the technical and procedural elements, supported by law, bulletins and medical guidance. The decision makers' role is at the heart of the business and there was an emerging view that it had not been afforded the recognition it deserved. Initially the plan was to introduce accreditation for decision makers to validate their knowledge and reassure the business and the outside world.

It quickly became clear from a learning needs analysis that as important as accreditation is, of more importance would be the learning and new approaches that a professional programme would bring.

The Lead Officer, PDCS, looked at possible solutions including taking the NVQ (national vocational qualification) route but concluded that the programme had to be about much more than producing evidence to gain accreditation. Because of the need to develop and enhance cognitive capability in the decision making community and the need to effect cultural change, a higher education approach was recommended, and specifically one which would develop considerative skills. This case study discusses the practicalities of the engagement between PDCS and the University of Chester since early 2006. It examines the relationships between the key members of the project team, and the approaches they have adopted, in order to gain some understanding of why this project has been successful.

Why WBIS at Chester?

Chester's ability to place the employer firmly at the centre of the learning process had been key to gaining the PDCS contract when in competition during the tendering process with several other universities. While the WBL methodology and flexibility of the framework were clearly important, another consideration was that PDCS staff considered that the Chester team understood the decision making role. Their ability to articulate their understanding of the complexity and value of this role also reassured PDCS its their decision to choose an HE-accredited work based learning route was correct; and this understanding had been engendered by years of working with work based learners and talking to employers about accreditation.

PDCS was also interested in the way in which Chester approached the tendering process. This was because it had been made clear that it would be a co-operative project between two equal partners to develop a programme that was fit for purpose for PDCS.

Rather than arrive with a portfolio of ready-made modules, the University worked with PDCS, itself learning from the business and developing modules and assignments both to accredit prior experiential learning and to develop and move decision makers on in their practice.

Fees for the programme were negotiated on the basis that PDCS would be partnering on curriculum development and delivery. Chester took the unusual step early on of seconding

one of its most experienced work based learning academics to the PDCS team in Blackpool: an academic with a background in physiology which was also relevant to disability. This decision appears to have been a major catalyst in developing the project as not only has it helped harmonise and invigorate the business relationship between Chester and PDCS, it has also provided a continuous physical presence from the University within PDCS itself. This meant that business issues and academic issues could be fused more readily than would otherwise have been the case.

Engaging with in-house expertise

The key PIDMA project team of four (with additional administrative support provided), comprised two people from Chester and two from PDCS, so providing both organisations with equal representation.

The size and make up of the PIDMA team has been highly influential to the success of the pilot. The four came from very different backgrounds and therefore brought with them a very diverse range of professional experience spanning higher education, work based learning, the NHS and disability issues. As a result, although the team has been small it has incorporated a set of complementary skills and knowledge that are particularly relevant to PIDMA.

As the project has moved out of the pilot phase, one of the key tasks of the team has been to develop the breadth of in-house expertise so that the experience and knowledge of the original team members can be transmitted to other facilitators within PDCS, who can be developed as Associate Tutors of the University, building capacity within PDCS itself.

This is a leading-edge approach in PDCS, because WBL and its associated teaching and learning methodologies were new to the organisation and building capability in delivery required a step change in approach. Although in many respects it would have been easier to have wholly relied on the University going forward, the reality was that PDCS needed the approach to be future-proofed and cost effective. The lead officer had the confidence that capability could eventually be built in PDCS staff as Associate Tutors, with the University role being based on quality assurance of the accredited provision.

Facilitating cultural change in PDCS

PDCS has been under pressure both internally and externally to improve its decision making process, and the decision to go for a university-level accredited work based learning programme was only taken after extensive research. As such, PDCS had already heavily invested in this project prior to Chester's involvement.

The lead officer had developed **three key design principles** to underpin the accreditation programme which would deliver for the business a **decision making career path, national quality standards and a capability model** which recognised increasing levels of ability and experience in decision makers. This gave business-specific shape and scope to the initiative

and provided the business framework for the development of the programme.

It is also important to note that the key aims of the programme were not only to develop decision makers' skills to a professional level, but also to raise the profile and value of decision making within the wider community. As such, the emphasis was not just on developing capability in the workplace, but on developing a programme which would ultimately bring about a cultural change with respect to how decision making is viewed.

This meant involvement and sharing of learning at all levels. The programme structure is:

Professional level	Academic level	Curriculum	Award
DM foundation level	30 credits level 4	Decision making skills and knowledge	Recognition of achievement
DM specialist level	60 credits level 5	Decision making skills and expert knowledge, plus coaching and supporting colleagues and line manager	Professional certificate
HEO advanced level	60 credits level 6	Decision making skills, risk, performance managing and leading of DM team, working with more senior managers	Graduate certificate

During the early stages of delivery, the PIDMA team received highly positive feedback from both decision makers who had attended PIDMA and also their managers (typically higher executive officers, or HEOs) regarding how this had encouraged them to reflect on their practice. This alone resulted in a great deal of interest in the programme within both PDCS, and the wider community of the Department for Work and Pensions. People began asking to enroll on the programme after recommendations from others, and after seeing them go through the process, hearing about their experiences and realising what they brought back into the workplace. **Staff moved on in their practice and shared their learning with colleagues, and this cultural change is significant in a business where decision makers previously tended to work independently.**

How PIDMA works

PIDMA embraces the technical, legal and disability knowledge required by decision makers in PDCS, and develops and teaches through WBL considerative, cognitive and deliberative skills. The work based learning principles underpinning PIDMA are simple:

- Identify for each job what skills and qualities are needed (the key design principles, and career path).
- Build on what staff can already do (varies according to job role and level) and teach them the things they need for their roles (this starts in the workshops).
- Test whether staff can use the principles in the workplace and involve those around them so that they improve in their roles too (work with senior managers, and the on-the-job work which is assessed).

- Check that the improvement keeps going (networking and continuous professional development).

The Chester WBL methodology used in PIDMA, based on the interrelationships between learning, capability, and critical reflection, consistently helps identify what must improve. It gives managers and their staff strategies to use in the workplace and measures how far they are successful. Work based learning gives staff the tools to do the job properly at whatever level, and in whatever area they are working. It teaches managers the skills for their own work in the decision making environment and the skills to help develop expertise and appropriate approaches in their staff. There is a significant amount of qualitative feedback already to support this.

Each module is underpinned by interactive workshops. These are facilitated by the university tutor and PDCS staff, who are developing their own teaching and facilitation capabilities. The workshops harness decision makers' existing knowledge, and provide a safe and constructive environment for discussion and debate. With effective shaping and guiding, these workshops enable the DMs and their managers to identify for themselves areas where their practice and knowledge need to develop. DMs subsequently undertake work based learning as they do their daily work, to consolidate and extend their practice and knowledge. They submit draft assignments and liaise with tutors for formative coaching and feedback.

The design of assignments is crucial. They are work and business focused, and demand the critical reflection consonant with high level work outcomes and university standards. This combination sometimes challenges traditional University assumptions about assessment design, methodology and associated evidence of achievement.

Tutors and line managers liaise closely over all aspects of the programme; indeed most line managers are already undertaking, or have undertaken PIDMA at manager level themselves, so all are party to the learning achieved. Consequently, the curriculum is continually business responsive and adjusted to reflect on-going needs.

HEO DM managers' evaluations:

'The main benefit of the programme for me is that it takes you 'back to your roots'. As a HEO DM you see cases everyday and although you don't necessarily make the decisions, you need to understand the decision making process and complex cases to be able to advise, coach and mentor your DMs. The programme really is great for that, along with the complementing modules such as leadership and management skills, which give you a more strategic and reflective approach to managing staff.'

'I have four DMs currently undertaking the higher programmes at the moment. They're getting on well and the difference in them personally and the improvements in their work and the influence they have on the team is already evident.'

Decision makers' evaluations:

'PIDMA makes you think outside of the box, no two cases are the same. It certainly makes you think of the case as an individual not a disability, i.e. how one customer deals with arthritis is completely different to another customer.'

'On the whole I am more self-sufficient, informed and confident in my decision making following my participation in PIDMA.'

'I'm able to pass my knowledge onto colleagues who come to me for advice. It's a worthwhile programme as it gives you a better insight and a more holistic approach to decision making. It also makes you think more about the actions and decisions you make and the repercussions and effects of them.'

'People know I've been on the programme and as a result they ask for advice on more difficult cases, I can honestly say my desk is always busy! I've also noticed more discussions in the room around PIDMA which helps to get the best out of people to help the customer.'

'One of the biggest criticisms the Agency faces is the inconsistency in decision making. PIDMA assists DMs in looking at cases critically and applying the knowledge and skills learned.'

'My disability knowledge has also increased as it's made me more open minded to scenarios ... PIDMA makes you see the whole picture and all the outside factors that need to be taken into consideration. It's not just about looking at the disability but also the needs arising from it.'

'I've always been open minded to learning and interested in the disability side of my job, therefore PIDMA seems a great opportunity and it did not let me down. It made me take a different approach to learning and made me think about the customer more – therefore I'm now able to make more grounded decisions. I truly believe to get it right first time is paramount.'

What was gratifying to the PIDMA team was that the evaluations showed that the learning was clearly going beyond the boundaries of those who had directly attended PIDMA, with managers reporting back that their decision makers were disseminating their knowledge to their teams thereby creating a community of learning.

What the DWP Standards Committee said:

'the pilot within PDCS ... to accredit decision makers using a learning framework referred to locally as PIDMA ... the Committee recognised the value of the learning framework where benefit cases were complex and where discretion of some kind needed to be exercised by the decision maker'.

(Source: DWP Standards Committee Annual Report 2007-2008)

Now that the 'pilot phase' is over, the 'roll-out' of the project is in the process of being implemented by PDCS at a strategic level across the DLA/AA business and is particularly focused on those decision makers whose casework is complex.

What have the PDCS team learned from this engagement?

- It is essential to establish and confirm values and integrity in initial negotiations. PDCS was able to work as an equal partner from the beginning because the PDCS team had been engaged in facilitating disability education in the business for some years. Crucial also was to have the vision and public support of the Chief Executive, because PDCS was at that stage stepping outside traditional civil service approaches.
- Analysing pre-delivery needs and curriculum design in advance is essential. The University reviewed new DM training material to establish the level of their formal training so that we could **build a professional development programme** and use the **key design principles** as the framework.
- Successful engagement means a two way transfer and sharing of knowledge capital, mutual learning and development. **We each had to learn about the way the other works.** We both have our mysteries.
- **It is essential to develop teaching and learning within the business** to develop organisational capacity in using WBL approaches. Work based learning was new to PDCS, so both Chester and the key PDCS project leaders needed to facilitate learning for staff on the programme and for their managers who were not necessarily on the programme but who needed to support them. The team needed to quickly acquire new teaching and learning methodologies congruent with the WBL approach. Both senior leads were accredited as Associate Tutors at the end of the pilot phase.

'I moved from a traditional expert approach to content delivery to a more subtle and appreciative use of expert knowledge during my progress to becoming an accredited Associate Tutor of the University of Chester myself. After all these years, it was quite an experience to be assessed by the University as I was delivering workshops and giving formative and summative feedback.'

Lead Officer, PDCS

'It is a wonderful concept that you get academic credit for critically reflecting on your daily practice and moving your practice on to reach professional standards.'

PDCS Senior Associate Tutor

- The operational and professional development interface has to be handled in context. Operational staff have a huge amount of work to do in determining claims so **learning time is at a premium** and time away from the desks needs to be managed carefully. **This is where the work based learning approach helps**, because it is on-the-job learning and staff learn from and at work rather than learn theory to then try and apply it at work.
- **Strategic cohort learning brings huge benefits** – learning together rather than individually – and we have developed strategic approaches to gain the greatest impact for the organisation and individual learners, for example running programmes with managers first to get learning and principles embedded, then concentrating on decision makers **who can role model good practice and influence colleagues**.
- Sizing and adapting the programme to best meet business needs is important – and in particular **creating a responsive curriculum**. As the months have gone by the programme has been adjusted to ensure that it keeps hitting the issues that matter to the business and keep the related academic activity proportionate.
- Assessment has to be fit for purpose, meaningful and cost effective and become in itself a vehicle for sharing learning. In the interests of validity, fitness for purpose and motivation, the PDCS team built capability into the assessment process. Working together, we have developed Chester’s critical reflection approach into the assessment of professional capability. We use a combination of spoken and written reflection, story boards, and confirming capability with managers and every activity is work focused. **Critical reflection itself has been the vehicle for developing considerative skills**, the precise element that decision makers and their managers need to do their job effectively. Besides assessing capability, **assessment activities have become an influencer of others around the staff on the programme and drawn them in**.
- An eye needs to be kept on the **strategic and political agenda within the organisation**. Government agendas and requirements change. What is top priority now may be superseded by something more urgent. The project team has striven to ensure that Chester has been kept up to date.
- Lastly and crucially, the interface between the business and the University has to be right – the requirements of curriculum design, learning outputs, assessment and quality assurance **have to work both ways**. Both partners have been prepared to be **creative and responsive**. Without this flexibility it would not have worked so well.

Specific lessons from the case study for the University

If universities and employers intend to engage in work based learning initiatives that involve close co-operation and joint delivery, they must consider the following:

- The degree of readiness of the employing organisation to engage in work based learning – and its understanding of WBL requirements – is crucial.
- The HEI must be prepared to work closely with the employer so that the resultant work based learning programmes that are negotiated meet the employer's needs as well as ensuring they have the necessary level of academic rigour.
- A useful way to facilitate this can be to place someone with appropriate experience of negotiated work based learning at HE level into the employer organisation (whether part-time or full-time depending on circumstances and resources). This not only shows commitment by the university to the employer, it also provides a valuable interface to allow the two organisations to communicate effectively and work as a united team. For this to work successfully, the university must also ensure that there are appropriate channels to facilitate regular and effective communication between their employee and the home department otherwise important learning may be lost.
- The choice of who should be part of any work based learning project team is important. While skills, knowledge and experience are relevant, team members must show a real commitment to driving the project forward as they may face obstacles to be overcome in both organisations due to general unfamiliarity with this type of engagement, and with each other's business models.
- Finally, a co-located team is useful in helping to create the tight working relationship that is often needed during a pilot phase. However, an appropriate infrastructure needs to be planned out early enough to enable the employer and university to capitalise on the positive feedback typically generated by such programmes.

Replicable features of the PDCS/Chester model

Arising from the identifiable lessons for both parties, there are some key features from this case study that are likely to be replicable more widely for HEI engagement with employers:

- **A transparent commitment to work as joint partners**

From the outset, PDCS wanted this project to succeed and had undertaken extensive research prior to deciding to opt for an approach based on an HE work based learning accreditation framework. Therefore it knew this was what it wanted, even if it was unsure how it could be achieved.

Through its WBIS framework, Chester could show that it knew what was involved in developing a work based learning programme that would meet the needs of employers; in other words, it could help PDCS achieve what it wanted to achieve. Just as importantly, Chester was able to articulate its vision that this would be based

on co-operation and equality between the two organisations who would be able to configure a route that was fit for purpose internally while meeting the academic standards required of an HE-level accredited programme.

In line with this vision, Chester and PDCS have since worked together to find the best way to support the development of decision making practice that is fair and consistent, and by so doing are helping to elevate decision making to a consistent and professional level.

- **Clear lines of communication**

Some understandable problems were experienced at an early stage of the pilot due to geographical and cultural differences between the two organisations. By placing a senior work based learning academic to work with the PDCS project team in Blackpool, Chester was able to help resolve this quickly. This decision was pivotal for PIDMA as it provided a valuable interface between the two organisations that would not have otherwise existed; this approach could be adopted more widely within HE employer engagement, where feasible.

- **Importance of team-working between organisations**

The knowledge, experience and background of its members proved to be crucial for the pilot phase of this project. The size and composition of the project team enabled it to lead the process effectively and coherently, giving direction to the decision-making and project management processes. Each team member brought different skills and knowledge that were specifically relevant to PIDMA. This knowledge and experience was undoubtedly important in developing a HE programme that was fit for purpose for PDCS, while ensuring that it had the necessary academic rigour.

- **High-level WBL skills**

The main, and continuing, challenge for both parties has been the development of high level WBL learning and teaching skills in employer-based staff facilitating the programme and to increase the awareness of its' power in line managers so that they can support their staff effectively in their work. As this has become embedded, there has been an observable change in culture which has been impacting favourably on motivation, job satisfaction and effectiveness. Developing this capacity is crucial for this type of HE engagement.

The success of PIDMA is a reflection of this approach, being driven by workplace needs and then being dependent for its success on workplace impacts. A significant factor in its acceptance within PDCS is the feedback from participants identifying how HE skills have helped them rethink the way they approach decision making, and the confirmation that this is happening from their line managers.



Negotiated WBL: General Lessons and Issues for the HE Sector and Employers

For universities wishing to be involved with employer engagement, negotiated WBL accreditation frameworks provide flexible and versatile ways of meeting this challenge. Indeed, the validation of such a framework can sometimes be seen as a 'step-change' in an HEIs provision and its engagement with organisations, allowing a responsiveness of approach that might otherwise be difficult to create. The choice and variety of approaches possible mean that HEIs typically have an accreditation mechanism which can allow them to respond to any likely HE engagement employers require.

With this come other issues. As has been seen in the PDCS case study, relationships with clients are crucial. How universities manage their relationships with clients in a way that can facilitate specific employer needs while meeting generic quality assurance requirements is not always straightforward. HEIs may be in a position to devolve responsibility for some of the negotiated provision and discussions in the sector about how best to facilitate this are ongoing (currently, this often involves the generation of formal 'partnership agreements' between HEIs and client organisations). The timescales involved in this can potentially impact on the responsiveness of HEIs to the requirements of outside organisations and research into this issue is at an early stage, with a need for further research, development and dissemination.

What might be termed 'systems issues' are also germane to HEI/employer interactions. Understandably, university systems (from registration and payment through to graduation) have in most cases been primarily developed to support full-time provision, and full-time undergraduate provision in particular. Frameworks with flexible, negotiable enrolment dates and which do not intrinsically fit in to the traditional academic year cycle pose a particular issue for universities. Where they have not done so already, HEIs will need to develop internal systems that can smoothly facilitate the demands of flexible accreditation frameworks as well as more traditional provision. This is vital if the imperatives of employer

engagement are to be met in appropriate and timely ways and programmes like PIDMA at PDCS facilitated.

What might be termed 'functionalism' can also be an issue. Organisations in general need to be clear that a university education means more than employee training. If other perceptions and expectations exist, a tension can develop between facilitating the needs of employers for accreditation and ensuring that the criticality demanded by universities of their students is maintained. In particular, critically reflective practice can be considered to be potentially subversive and organisations which are unresponsive to challenging, critical, thinking (and the change that often arises from it) may create unexpected issues for universities and possibly themselves.

In the PDCS case study, expectations (from both organisations) were addressed at an early stage and this clearly proved beneficial for the development of the relationship.

Given these (and other) issues, there are clear challenges to be met by the negotiated WBL approach in HE. Nevertheless, there can be little doubt that negotiated WBL accreditation frameworks provide a welcome opportunity for flexible co-operation between universities and employers, as well as individual learners. The lessons of the PDCS case study, in particular, can help inform others as they seek to work on projects involving employer engagement, whether they be HEIs or organisations seeking to work more closely with the university sector.

Conclusion

Evaluation by stakeholders involved in employer engagement opportunities with HEIs using negotiated WBL accreditation frameworks suggests that this can be a positive means of meeting the needs of the wider business community. The key tasks for HEIs relate to developing successful versions of these frameworks through investment and capacity building, and by ensuring that they are facilitated internally by the development of appropriate support systems. As the PDCS case study demonstrates, clarity of expectations and the generation of relevant strategies to ensure positive working relationships with employing organisations are also crucial, and lasting success in meeting employer engagement objectives are virtually impossible without them.

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