

## **Research Title: Exploration of the key factors to enable Negotiated Work Based Learning to be accepted within HE - a case based approach**

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### Abstract:

Using a case based approach, this paper will examine some key factors that appear necessary if negotiated forms of work based learning (NWBL) have any chance of being accepted into the HE provision. The case study examined here is part of a wider doctoral study examining what factors impact on how different universities perceive and locate work based learning (WBL) and particularly NWBL into their HE provision.

The case study is based on the University of Chester (Chester) which is generally recognised within the wider academic community in WBL as having created one of the most flexible academic frameworks to support different forms of WBL and NWBL. The study focuses on the experiences, memories and reflections of three key individuals who were involved in the early stages of developing the Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) framework at Chester which is now used extensively to support all forms of WBL both internally within the university and also in the wider external community (Major, Meakin, & Perrin, 2011). The flexibility and sustainability of Chester's WBIS framework is evidenced by its ability to facilitate an increasing variety of WBL projects from the more traditional HE WBL offerings such as placements, corporate programmes and contract partnerships to projects that are more challenging for HE such as co-delivery arrangements and formal partnerships (Talbot, Perrin, & Meakin, 2014).

Drawing on the work of Major, Perrin, Talbot, Wall and Meakin who are all practitioners and researchers of NWBL and WBL at Chester, together with prominent researchers within the wider field of NWBL such as Portwood, Costley and Gibbs, the paper identifies some key factors, such as the need for a champion, the influence of the university's culture, the relevance of the word 'integrative' and the importance of timing. In addition it will highlight that for such initiatives to be effective and sustainable, WBL and in particular NWBL must be underpinned through strong organisational and governance capabilities to ensure the resultant programmes meet the criteria from a quality assurance perspective. The paper concludes by drawing together and evaluating whether the factors which appear key in enabling the WBIS framework at Chester could be embraced by other Universities in their pursuit of WBL initiatives (Talbot et al., 2014).

## Introduction

This paper is based on research which has been undertaken as part of a doctoral study examining the impact of various factors on how negotiated forms of work based learning (NWBL) have been able to develop within Higher Education (HE). The field research was undertaken at the University of Chester (Chester), a post '92 'new' university, and took the form of in-depth qualitative interviews with three key individuals involved in the development of what Chester believes is one of the of the most flexible, and arguably most successful, frameworks for supporting NWBL.

Firstly, within the context of this paper, it is important to understand what is meant by NWBL and how it differs from other forms of experiential learning, including placements that are commonly perceived as being a form of work based learning (WBL). The importance of emphasising this distinction is illustrated when considering one of the earliest accepted definitions from Boud, Solomon, & Symes who state WBL is '*a class of programmes that bring together universities and work organizations to create new learning opportunities in workplaces*' (Boud, Solomon, & Symes, 2001, p. 4). Such a definition encompasses all forms of WBL from conventional programmes adapted via negotiation with employers through to the creation of innovative programmes which place the learner and their workplace at the centre (Talbot et al., 2014). However, the latter forms of WBL are a step change away from the traditional academic learning frameworks that are regulated by the protocols associated with their respective academic disciplines (Major, 2002a). As a result, the term work based learning describes a variety of practices which can differ markedly in terms of their context and purpose (Boud et al., 2001; Jonathan Garnett, 2007; Nikolou-Walker & Garnett, 2004; Nixon, Smith, Stafford, & Camm, 2006; Nottingham, 2012; Weston, 2013).

Whilst recognising that WBL comes in many forms, Garnett and Workman argue that it is important to make a clear distinction regarding NWBL. They argue that in order for WBL to be classified as '*negotiated*' it must be "*grounded in the context, nature and imperatives of work*" (Jonathan Garnett & Workman, 2009, p. 3) so placing the workplace, rather than a specific academic discipline, as the focus of the learning experience. The importance of this distinction is reiterated by Lester & Costley (2010) who emphasise the point that NWBL is situated within the workplace, or resulting from workplace concerns, therefore is highly contextualised. As such, the academic discipline(s) which are drawn upon to support the subsequent learning being undertaken must be identified and applied in relation to the context of the workplace and identification of the learner's needs and motivations for learning. As such NWBL is transdisciplinary in nature (Costley & Armsby, 2007).

## Background

The concept of the workplace to site and contextualise learning is not new, with examples of practitioner learning embedded in several professional fields including Engineering, Health and Education (Costley, 2007). However, Major (2005) and Boud and Solomon (2001) assert that within HE, the concept of 'negotiated' forms of learning is relatively new.

Many universities have developed an interest in WBL in response to government pressure for them to become more accessible to business by offering programmes that are relevant and applicable to the requirements of the workplace (Bolden, Connor, Duquemin, Hirsh, &

Petrov, 2009; Leitch, 2005; Talbot, 2013b; Wedgwood, 2008; Wilson, 2012). As a result, there is now a general acceptance that WBL holds an important position within HE (Brodie & Irving, 2007), with reflective and experiential learning increasingly being utilised to inform HE practices across many academic disciplines (Costley & Dikerdem, 2012).

However, despite the growth of WBL initiatives over the last twenty years (Brodie & Irving, 2007), true examples of NWBL remain rare (Major et al., 2011) and typically remain on the periphery of universities' activities (Lester & Costley, 2010). This may be partly due to the fact that inherent cultures of many universities appear closed to the concept that learning at an HE level can occur outside the confines of clearly defined academic disciplines (Major, 2002a; Portwood, 2001). In addition, many universities' processes and procedures are designed to support the management, delivery and assessment of standardised, discipline led programmes that are typically aimed at full time UG students. (Lester & Costley, 2010). Finally, McNay (2006) argues that rather than facilitating WBL, government pressure on universities to monitor and audit their activities has actually forced much of HE to move towards more bureaucratic and managerially focused structures with rigid quality and assessment processes that struggle to support anything other than a model of mass provision. McNay (2006) argues the rigidity in many universities' systems and procedures means that it is far more difficult for them to support more innovative and creative programmes.

Others echo McNay's views. Whilst it is generally accepted within HE that the workplace provides a valuable opportunity for learning (Travers, 2012a), Nottingham (2012) claims most universities are nervous about incorporating NWBL into their core provision due to concerns regarding quality assurance and how this can be accommodated and audited within their standardised systems and procedures. Even where NWBL is well established, as in the case of Middlesex University which has one of the largest and most successful centres for NWBL in the UK, Garnett (2007) claims it does not sit comfortably within the university's structures and procedures which have remained doggedly focused on full-time UG programmes. Garnett (2007) goes on to state that he believes the issues experienced at Middlesex are common across the sector, based on anecdotal evidence from other practitioners and researchers within the field of WBL.

As well as quality assurance issues, there also remains a general undercurrent of resistance to NWBL within much of mainstream HE (Major, 2002a; Nottingham, 2012) due to misconceptions around what it involves and how it is facilitated (Lester & Costley, 2010; Wedgwood, 2008). Costley & Dikerdem (2012) refer to an institutional resistance towards research based within the field of WBL citing arguments that it is just '*an easy way to enter higher education*', and is little more than an exploration of the development and training of practical competences. Therefore, despite McNay's (2005) claims that the concept of the 'research-led' university is actually quite a modern concept and has actually distorted the purpose of a university, misunderstandings and misgivings around NWBL have resulted in claims that it is instrumentalist and economic in nature and that the teaching and learning involved in NWBL undermines the philosophies and values of mainstream HE (Wedgwood, 2008).

All of the above emphasises that if universities wish to be involved in NWBL they need to create suitable frameworks that incorporate rigorous assessment procedures which ensure the teaching and learning undertaken is accepted as being at an HE level. Up to now, there

has been no nationally agreed framework for WBL (Chisholm, Harris, Northwood, & Johrendt, 2009), therefore most examples of NWBL have been developed and managed at a local level. As such, Workman (2010) emphasises the importance of having a high level champion who is able and willing to argue the case for NWBL at an institutional level. She claims success of any initiative is highly dependent upon individuals who are passionate and who are able to recognise and work within the culture of their institution in order to promote NWBL. In addition, she highlights the importance of such individuals not only being able to attract interest both internally and externally but also, perhaps more critically, funding as this can often help to sway those in a senior position to look on NWBL in a more favourable light.

## **Research Approach**

This qualitative study is phenomenological in nature (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2006), as its purpose is to develop a deeper understanding of the motivations surrounding why the WBIS framework which is used to support NWBL was developed at Chester. In line with other qualitative studies, it is small scale and focuses on in depth, detailed enquiry (Patton, 1990; Silverman, 2006).

### **Qualitative Interviewing**

The interview is well recognised and highly regarded as a fact finding technique. It has been used to support research for over a century which has resulted in a wide variety of interview techniques across a vast range of disciplines including business and education (Tierney & Dilley, 2002). As an interview technique, qualitative interviews provide a unique opportunity for the interviewer to develop a mutual understanding and empathy with their interviewee (Fontana, 2002) and therefore, unlike more rigid interview techniques, can provide a means of helping to unlock rich and contextual information about interviewee's reflections of their experiences and motivations in particular situations (Kvale, 1996; Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Warren, 2002).

### **Case Study**

This paper is based on a field study undertaken at Chester which is generally regarded as offering one of the most flexible forms of NWBL (Major et al., 2011) via its 'Work Based and Integrative Studies' (aka WBIS) framework. The WBIS framework is essentially a '*shell*' framework that contains empty module slots that can be populated with modules from across the university. In addition, the WBIS framework now incorporates what it refers to as 'negotiated experiential learning modules' or NELMs where the content, learning outcomes and assessment are negotiated directly with learners and their employers. As such, the framework is the vehicle which enables the WBL team to facilitate all forms of learning including NWBL across a huge variety of disciplines and vocations (Talbot et al., 2014).

Whilst critics of case based research claim it is weak because it lacks rigour and its findings cannot be easily generalised (Cohen et al., 2006), case studies have been used extensively within all areas of social sciences including business research, and are considered particularly relevant when undertaking research that focuses on real-life contexts (Yin, 2003).

As the purpose of the case study is to gain an understanding of the perceptions and expectations of the key people involved, this qualitative study is phenomenological in nature (Cohen et al., 2006). Qualitative studies are naturally small-scale focusing on in depth, detailed enquiry (Patton, 1990). Phenomenological research provides a means of gaining a rich awareness of how people construct and interpret the world around them and the way this impacts on their relationships with others (Silverman, 2005).

## Research Process

Through the use of qualitative interviews, this research examines the memories and motivations of three individuals who played key roles in how the WBIS framework was created and developed. The three people were approached to take part in this study, not only because of their knowledge of the WBIS framework and their involvement in its development but also because of their different roles within the university which has influenced their perspectives of WBL and the WBIS framework. The interviews were spread over a period of approximately six months between November 2013 and July 2014.

The first person (A) to be interviewed was one of the first people to be employed after the WBIS framework was created, and now manages the Centre of Work Related Studies (CWRS) which is responsible for the WBIS framework and NWBL. The second person (B) is generally regarded within Chester as being the founder of the WBIS framework, and who is recognised as its most respected champion. The final person (C) is a senior manager within the Quality Assurance department at Chester. (C) was approached to take part in this study after the interviewer identified from (B) that he had been involved in validating the WBIS framework in 1998.

Each interview was approximately one hour in length, and was recorded after obtaining a verbal consent from each of the interviewees. Interviews were then transcribed and e-mailed to interviewees for comments and amendments, after which they were subjected to a basic thematic analysis to draw out common themes based on the literature and the interviews (Boyatzis, 2006). As a result, the researcher identified the following themes: **Historical Context, the Importance of 'integrative' in WBIS title, and Quality Systems and Procedures.**

## Findings

### **Historical Context:**

The creation of the WBIS framework occurred over a period of time through discussions between key individuals not only internally at Chester, but also between Chester and the leading HEI in WBL, Middlesex University. The discussions between (B) and Middlesex influenced how WBIS was finally structured.

*'I began to look then at the potential for ... offering ... people in full time employment the opportunity to gain a university qualification through work based learning effectively, ... establishing what eventually became the Work Based and Integrative Studies framework. The WBIS programme and framework as validated in 1997-98 ... was really our main ... development by way of work based learning beyond that provision ... for full time undergraduates. And we developed it at all levels ...*

*through negotiated work based learning, and it's this ability which has proved to be our crowning glory'. (B)*

*'.. so you could say it was market pressure in a way. But also I became aware that the model of work based learning ... in Chester ... was narrower in outlook ... than ... Middlesex. And I struck up a relationship ... with Professor [names individual] who is the driving force for work based learning at Middlesex ... and ... I got very interested ... and decided that we could put together a team at Chester and do the same but clearly make it fit our specific needs and requirements, and our culture and everything else. So [colleague 1] joined me, [colleague 2] joined me and [C] joined me, um, and I think it was the four of us really that worked on this.' (B)*

In addition, at the time when WBIS was going through its validation, Chester was an HE College whose awards were accredited through the University of Liverpool (Liverpool). As such the relationship between Chester and Liverpool was critical to the creation of the WBIS framework.

*'And I well remember the work based and integrative studies going to the University of Liverpool Senate and ... the Vice Principal ... telling me that most of the academics at the Senate just put their head in their hands and said:*

*'look we don't understand this, we don't understand it, but we trust you [Chester] if you say this is what you want; there is a market for this, then you know, you have our blessing, as it were',*

*which I thought was rather nice really! And I think that was because the University had always gone the extra mile ... you dot all the I's and cross all the T's and provide the relevant paperwork and so on. We were always aware that we had to do a little bit more than perhaps even the people at Liverpool did to demonstrate our proficiency.' (B)*

*'They [Liverpool] trusted us, and this was something innovative that they didn't have. But because the validation discussions were conducted according to due procedure and seemed to convince particularly the externals that were present at the time um, they trusted us that we knew what we were doing with this.' (C )*

Finally, the relationship between (B) and the senior managers and particularly the Principal and Vice Principal of Chester at that time, together with his decision to involve (C ) to resolve any quality issues appears to have been a key factor.

*'Hmm, that was a deliberate move to get him [C ] involved because we knew that unless we could meet all of the quality requirements of the University ... we wouldn't get very far at all! (B)*

*'I don't mean this to sound arrogant in any way but I think because ... I'd earned the respect of my colleagues as an academic ... [the then] Dean of Arts and Humanities ... was not at all sympathetic to work based learning ... but he respected me.' (B)*

*'he [Principal of Chester College] was very, very supportive and I think without that leadership and support from the top it might not have happened.' (B)*

*It would have been just at the transfer between [the last Principal] and [the VC]. There was a little bit of an interregnum when [the deputy principal] ... who was acting as the Principal at that time was in favour of this. She definitely would have taken an interest in this because that was her nature ... she was interested in all new programmes ... She ... chaired a number of validations.'* (C)

### **Importance of 'Integrative' in the WBIS title**

The importance of the inclusion 'integrative' within the framework title was stressed by all three interviewees. When asked to clarify what they meant by 'integrative' and why it is so important, they all stated that WBIS framework requires the integration of taught modules from the traditional academic curricula to be applied to and underpin any experiential learning that takes place within the workplace. Without this, they all argued that the resultant learning would not have the necessary academic rigour to be classified as HE level, and that it was this characteristic which differentiated the Chester WBIS framework from WBL offered elsewhere.

*'So we called it (stresses) work based and integrative studies because we wanted people to have the opportunity not only to learn through work but also to take modules from the University's suite of modules that were relevant to what they wanted to learn.'* (B)

*'... the clue is in the word 'integrative' in the WBIS name, and people often say 'what the hell does that mean?', because Work Based Learning is fairly obvious and intuitive. 'Integrative' refers to the fact that students can integrate into their chosen pathway of study relevant taught modules. ... Most universities with work based learning frameworks, if you look at what they've got, they do APL and they do work based projects obviously, and credit transfer. But what they don't tend to do is the taught stuff. So in other words, the taught work related modules we've got which are subject specific they don't tend to have. So that is something else we have that they don't have.'* (A)

*So (slight sigh) there was a lot of debate over the title (slight pause) um, and eventually a decision was reached that it should say on the tin what it was meant to do; it was meant to be work based and it was meant to cover integrative studies; studies that were integrated. And I remember the debate being very careful not to use the word 'integrated' but 'integrative' studies. And the idea was that you could free up the modular framework within the university and put together specific programmes based on modules that were already there and form your own programme which would be approved on an individual basis. ..., where we didn't have um, modules that were pre-existing in the modular framework; that's where the taught work based learning modules came in.* (C)

*'originally it was designed firstly for individuals, and the integrative studies part was much more prominent; this was the way it was sold at Validation; that it would make use of all the modules in the university by putting them together in for an individual pathway for an individual route through for individual students.'* (C)

### **Quality Systems and Procedures**

The flexibility of the WBIS framework also seems to be at odds with Chester's processes and procedures which are often characterised as managerial and bureaucratic. As such, it

was important to understand how (B) and his team were able to argue for its existence, and also to explore its relationship with Chester's quality assurance systems.

*'firstly by the parts of the university that looked after standards and quality procedures burying their heads in the sand and not paying close attention as to what was going on in the WBIS area. And secondly, ... allowing the WBIS area to set up almost a parallel registry.'* (C).

*The institution as a whole is very supportive of WBIS because it's a key USP ... However, layers below ... systems which are very often 'one size fits all' have tended to be applied right across the board. Then you get a situation whereby somebody ... says 'hold on a sec, this doesn't fit; this doesn't work for us' because we're completely different ... and WBIS doesn't quite fit.'* (A)

*We've had the impression that because the practitioners in WBIS can give such a good account of themselves and the programme, that people who are very unfamiliar with it don't know how to counter any propositions put forward; they don't know how to engage in that sort of discussion. And therefore have not come to any conclusions of unsound practice, if there is any. Um, basically it is too complicated, it's too novel; it's outside auditors' typical experience so they've let it go. There's a feeling we've got through a couple of audits on that basis.* (C )

*'My view is, as far as I've been aware, nothing's ever really gone wrong with it. But (emphasis), um until very recently it's been completely unmonitored (slight pause) through formal mechanisms; through mechanisms that explicitly and clearly report back through normal university monitoring systems.'* (C )

*'I think this is why we've experienced so many, um yes, difficulties in convincing people how things should work. You know I'm thinking of the broader university and central services ... They always had the view that a student came here for three years on a full-time basis and they were comfortable with that. And all these systems which we have in place are built around that idea of what the university is about.* (B)

The issue of autonomy also seems to be important for frameworks such as WBIS to develop and grow. As such where it is situated was raised as a key concern.

*'if you look at the history of Work Based Learning in the UK that these things grow and flourish when there is a degree of independence and when the trans-disciplinarity of the thing is allowed to flourish; when they are put into a silo that is when the cap is put on growth, and it's too much of a coincidence.* (A)

The ability for WBIS to grow at the outset also appears to be closely linked to (B)'s ability to attract funding.

*'So there was a lot of money around and the Government of the day was using to incentivise our education. Now our vice chancellors, with the best will in the world, I'm sure don't just support initiatives for their ... benefit ... there has to be money involved (emphasis) in other words, and there was money involved, and reasonable sums of money! ... so the VC was pleased for people to have ideas and offer to submit bids ... and bring in money. So we brought in a fair bit of money, in various ways, and brought in student numbers which enabled me to increase staffing and get*

*the whole thing on a departmental/centre type footing. Eventually, for a short while we were a faculty (small laugh).’ (B)*

## **Discussion**

When examining the findings, it becomes apparent that the opportunity to create the WBIS framework and its development has been largely down to timing, context and the people involved. The WBIS framework was created in 1998 when there was significant interest by the then government to create links between employers and universities. This resulted in an era where grants and funding were readily available to universities who wished to explore various forms of WBL including NWBL. Through various bids by [B] in particular, Chester was able to take advantage of this and gained approximately £75,000 over a four year period to develop its WBL offering, validate WBIS and create the Centre of Work Related Studies (CWRS). What is also evident is that when CWRS and WBIS appear to have grown appears to coincide with when they have had a degree of autonomy within the University structure and hierarchy.

What is also clear is that the WBIS framework has never sat that easily within Chester’s systems and structures and that for it to function, it has effectively created its own set of procedures for auditing processes which [C] referred to as a parallel registry, likening WBIS to a small university within a larger university. For Chester to accept such a radical concept was only possible because [B] was so highly respected and he was able to gain both interest and support from those at the highest level within Chester. This commitment to the project is clearly evidenced by the fact that at the time of the validation the Acting Principal of Chester argued its case at its inaugural validation meeting.

Another factor which appears to be important is the timing of the validation. In 1998 Chester did not have its own awarding powers, but validated its programmes and modules through the University of Liverpool. Chester was a small, systems oriented HE college feeding into a part of a university which operated on a far more collegiate basis where power was devolved down to faculty level. As such it is likely that much of Liverpool, including its senior management team, were not even aware of WBIS. In addition, whilst it is clear that Liverpool did not understand WBIS or WBL, they appear to have had few reservations regarding validating the framework because of their confidence in Chester’s quality assurance procedures, despite recognising that this was a departure from the more traditional HE mode of teaching, learning and assessment.

## **Conclusions**

Whilst it should be recognised that this is a very small scale study which has only sought the views and impressions of three individuals of a project which took place over fifteen years ago, there are some important conclusions to be drawn. The first is the importance of having a champion who is respected by their peers, those at the most senior level and also within the wider HE community. Otherwise it is unlikely that NWBL will gain the necessary ‘buy-in’ from the senior management team. In addition, it is essential that those promoting NWBL show evidence that the quality systems and procedures being implemented have the necessary rigour to ensure the learning taking place is at an HE level. As part of this it is essential that NWBL can show evidence that the learning and assessment meets the QAA requirements for study at HE level. At Chester this is defined by the word ‘integrative’ in the

WBIS title which emphasises that the WBIS framework melds academic and work based learning together so that each support and build upon one other.

It is also clear that frameworks, such as WBIS, sit uncomfortably with most universities' systems and procedures as the latter are typically highly standardised and are geared towards full-time undergraduate provision. As such, it is essential that those at the most senior level allow departments (such as the Centre of Work Related Studies (CWRS) some degree of autonomy over managing their programmes, otherwise NWBL is unlikely to grow and develop. However, in turn those involved in NWBL must provide evidence that the systems and procedures monitoring NWBL are formalised and audited and they need to be visible to those responsible for quality assurance. In addition, for NWBL to be allowed this degree of autonomy it must be able to show not only that it is financially viable but that it can generate enough income to warrant it having the dispensation to work outside normal university systems. Whilst the political climate around 2000 resulted in a lot of publicly funded grants which enabled universities and colleges such as Chester to explore NWBL, the current economic and political environment means this funding is no longer so freely available. As such, it is questionable whether anything like WBIS could be created today.

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