Chapter 4

The Construction and Validation of an Institutional Work Based Learning Programme

Derek Portwood and Jonathan Garnett

Chapter 4

The Construction and Validation of an Institutional Work Based Learning Programme

Derek Portwood and Jonathan Garnett

The major test for work based learning at Middlesex University came from within the University itself in the form of its validation as an academically credible programme. Validation is always a complicated matter involving questions of academic rationale, quality of provision and systems, evidence of market demand and appropriate resourcing. It was particularly complex in this case because the introduction of work based learning would be a curricular innovation affecting the academic programme of the whole institution. The fundamental issue posed by work based learning within the web of processes involved in validation was whether or not work based learning could be recognised as a subject or field of studies in its own right? In prosaic but profound terms, the University's academic authorities were asked to decide if they would approve that all of the University's awards could carry the title of Work Based Learning?

This chapter explores why the University did approve the programme. On reflection, the crucial factors appear to be the development of institutional commitment, the management of the political debate and the formation and presentation of the proposal. These factors are connected and inter-active in several ways not least through the role of key players, especially the University's senior management and the proposers of the programme. Obviously, the views of the former and the credentials of the latter are vital considerations. For the purpose of analysis, however, the over-riding factors will be examined separately. A synthesis of the detailed information which this provides will enable a model of the construction and validation of an *institutional* work based learning programme to be formulated and discussed.

Development of institutional commitment

Institutional commitment takes various forms. Usually it is formally expressed in the Mission and Values Statement of the University or specific policy statements. More specifically, it depends on the dominant ideology of the Academic Board of the University and direct expressions of support by senior management. The acid test of institutional commitment, however, is the backing up of rhetoric by the commitment of resources.

At Middlesex, this process had begun in the 1980s through the creation of the Modular Degree Scheme which by 1990 covered all the work of the Faculties of Social Science and Humanities and accounted for two-fifths of the student population. The Scheme was at under-graduate level only

The Construction and Validation of an Institutional Work Based Learning Programme

but included provision for the accreditation of prior experiential learning. The leaders of an Enterprise in Higher Education programme in the late 1980s (sponsored by the Department of Employment) recognised the potential of the Scheme to produce the kind of responsive, flexible academic programmes which would increase the employment prospects of students. The Enterprise programme consequently supported the decision of senior management to create an academic credit scheme for the whole academic programme by funding a consultant to a small task force which was set up for this purpose.

Following the appointment of a new Vice-Chancellor and a new Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) in the early 1990s, both of whom supported the ideology of an institution-wide credit-based modular scheme - in that it promoted not only employability but access and thereby a more comprehensive student profile - a common academic framework was created. In so far as the framework was based on the principle of the recognition of learning wherever and whenever it occurs, this opened up the opportunity to extend the existing accreditation activity to a wide range of learning activities in the workplace.

Middlesex invested heavily in the implementation of the common academic framework, notably in designing and building a new corporate student database. It is difficult to see how the complications of recording and tracking work based learning students could be achieved without such a system. Direct investment in work based learning itself was through the appointment of a University Accreditation Manager and a University Accreditation Officer and the successes of their work together with those of a project funded by the Employment Department 'Curriculum in the Workplace' led to the appointment of the first Professor of Work Based Learning in the United Kingdom and the establishment of the National Centre for Work Based Learning Partnerships (NCWBLP) in 1993. The teaching role of the NCWBLP became critical to the continued operation of the Centre on a cost centre basis. Discussions at senior management level were required to establish a mechanism whereby financial resources could be transferred to NCWBLP on the basis of credit points taken by work based learning students. This provided the basis upon which the Work Based Learning Studies Subject Area could be planned and was crucial for the pan-University dimension of the delivery of the Subject as it provided NCWBLP with the means to purchase staff time from the Schools.

The Employment Department, HE Branch (1991) had recognised the potential of credit accumulation and transfer schemes to achieve flexible programmes but asked "will departmental structures, both academic, managerial and financial, accommodate easily to students who are no longer easy to identify with the Department or the subject?" On the other hand, Robertson (1994) highlighted the use of academic credit as an organising instrument and Middlesex University exemplified in the development of a common academic framework a 'constitutional' credit scheme (Portwood 1990) which embraces and integrates the functions of the whole institution. Hence the inter-disciplinary, pan-University nature of work based learning could be accommodated outside the School/Faculty structure because it complied with the principles, protocols and practices of the common academic framework.

The use of regulations as a means of exercising power over others by reducing their freedom of action is widely recognised (Handy, 1993). At Middlesex the previously mentioned small task force was commissioned to tackle the jungle of CNAA, Polytechnic and Subject Area regulations. It developed regulations for the Middlesex Academic Credit Scheme (March, 1991), Procedures for the Accreditation of Company Training and Assessment of Prior Learning (June, 1991) and secured approval for them through the formal Committee structure of the then Polytechnic. This activity contributed towards a favourable climate for and directly influenced the development of the common assessment regulations introduced in 1993 as part of the Common Academic Framework. With the implementation of the Common Academic Framework the old byzantine web

The Construction and Validation of an Institutional Work Based Learning Programme

of overlapping regulations was swept away to be replaced by one set of University regulations for all the taught programmes of the University at under-graduate and post-graduate levels. These regulations were credit based and allowed unprecedented flexibility within set limits to incorporate credit, whatever the source, into an individual's academic programme. Regulations governing the development of collaborative programmes and quality assurance procedures also underwent a major overhaul to ensure they were sufficiently responsive to the changing needs and operating conditions of the University. The revised Quality Assurance Handbook (1994) reflects the growing maturity and flexibility of quality assurance when it says "it is not intended to impose standardisation regardless of the individual circumstances". The introduction of the Common Academic Framework and related reviews had thus ensured that the regulatory framework of the institution would facilitate rather than merely circumscribe the innovative features of the Work Based Learning Studies Subject Area. In these ways institutional commitment for work based learning was in the context of an educational ideology and organisational structure which enabled the principles of work based learning to be practised.

Management of political debate

The development of the Work Based Learning Studies Subject Area involved the written statement of its educational philosophy, particularly in respect of the aims and objectives of the Subject and the assessment criteria. Eschewing the notion of a deficit model of the learner, the Subject Area placed value on learning from all sources and the development of customised programmes as expressions of its lifelong learner centred philosophy. The development of regulatory and procedural frameworks and mechanisms to implement these facets illustrates the influence educational philosophy has (perhaps too infrequently) on the structures of the University.

The importance placed upon lifelong learning by government, employers and professional bodies (spurred largely by global competitiveness) had produced a climate and a 'relatively supportive policy environment' (Robertson 1994) which were conducive to the whole work based learning approach. Its emphasis on accreditation of prior work based learning and customised work based programmes of study made it ideal for continuing professional development and a means of achieving national education and training targets.

Client requirements and satisfaction ultimately determine student numbers on which curriculum innovation is often judged. Clients may be internal as at Middlesex University where work based learning provided an orientation and resource for staff development. For external clients work based learning programmes may meet client demand by recognising and building upon existing achievement in a way which is relevant and cost effective for the individual and the employer.

Much of the foregoing analysis has focused on factors described as frameworks, structures or systems. Even more crucial are the actions of individuals as proposers, developers, champions, allies or opponents of innovation. Thus institutional commitment could be seen as the product of dedicated and appropriately qualified individuals gaining sufficient support from individual champions and allies to overcome overt opposition to innovative development. In this crucial area the framework of the institution provides the arena for a political contest in which both sides will appeal to external circumstances and developments and perceived client demand as key arguments in favour of their point of view. Effective champions need to be able to control the allocation of resources, influence institutional commitment (eg. have a seat on Academic Board), have sufficient authority to shape organisational structures and will often have line manager responsibility for developers. Allies are likely to have significant common cause with the proposers of the innovation (for example in this specific case the Independent Learning Subject Area) but will not have the

authority to act as a champion. Opponents will be those who see the innovation as damaging to their philosophical beliefs, organisational position or share of resources. The energy, position and prospects of success of the opponent will determine whether the opposition takes the form of overt resistance within the political arena of the institutional framework or whether a passive stance will be adopted.

At Middlesex, as the proposal to develop academic programmes in, rather than just by, Work Based Learning was a significant step forward by the institution it received initial consideration at Management Team and Board of Governors prior to progressing to Academic Board for approval in principle. Only after these high level hurdles had been cleared was the proposal developed through the standard resource approval and validation procedures which would normally be the only checks on the development of a new programme. The creation of the Professorship and the NCWBLP already testified to the academic credentials and political acumen of the proposer and the extent to which support for developments in Work Based Learning could secure institutional commitment. Nevertheless it is highly significant that the formal proposal was put forward by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic). Despite the cogency of the argument and the general favourable circumstances, the radical nature of awarding qualifications carrying Work Based learning in the title and honours degrees not classified in the traditional manner proved too much for the Academic Board to accept at the first time of asking and these issues were referred to a specialist task group comprising the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), Head of Academic Development and Quality Assurance. Academic Registrar and Director NCWBLP for detailed consideration prior to return to Academic Board. The proposal was then approved.

Formation and presentation of proposal

The academic case for Work Based Learning Studies was essentially research based and drew not only upon the formal work based learning research projects carried out at Middlesex University and other Universities (Brennan and Little 1996) but also on research carried out on the claims for accreditation put forward by individual work based learners (Garnett 1998). This research also influenced the educational philosophy. Activity of a research and development nature had also informed and directed the Common Academic Framework. For example a key feature of the organisational framework was the introduction of a common computer database and common timetable. In both cases extensive research was undertaken to establish the requirements for the system, existing systems were compared and an evaluation undertaken leading to the development of tailor made systems. Development of the regulatory framework also involved research as reference was made to the regulations in place at other institutions with credit accumulation and transfer schemes and the effects of certain regulations on Honours classification were tested using a database of 2000 student records. Accreditation activity provided evidence of client demand and the attitudes of existing partners were examined by independent survey.

For a programme of study to be really work based it requires the active participation of the employer. Recognition of learning within the work place via accreditation provides the basis for a relationship based upon intellectual rather than purely commercial partnership as both the employer and the University have learning resources which can be used to construct programmes of study. The willingness of the University to recognise and embrace such a partnership was clearly rooted in the mission and values of the University. However, the impact on staff development and appraisal systems and particularly of their curricula and training programme cannot be ignored. The institutionalisation of work based learning in both settings radically affects attitudes and human resource systems. Indeed, it could be argued that the institutionalisation is not complete unless it occurs within partner organisations as well as the university itself.

The Construction and Validation of an Institutional Work Based Learning Programme

The willingness to accept that learning at higher education level can be gained outside of the laboratory, the library or the classroom and can be assessed and quantified in academic terms is fundamental to the Work Based Learning Studies Subject Area. At Middlesex the philosophical commitment and regulatory framework were already in place and initial work with organisations and individuals provided much of the rationale for the proposed Subject Area. Accreditation provided the mechanism to root the proposed work based programme firmly on learning gained from work and thus engage in a work based educational partnership at the level of the individual and the organisation. Without any doubt accreditation was the keystone (and remains as such) of the institutionalisation of work based learning at Middlesex University. However, as mentioned above, this involved a senior academic appointment of a University Accreditation Manager and the approval through the formal committee structure of the University of procedures for the Accreditation of Company Training and Short Courses and of Individuals' Prior and Work Based Learning.

The modules which form the Work Based Learning Studies Subject Area were designed by a core team of staff within the NCWBLP. They are centred upon the thirteen work based learning modules originally validated within the Independent Learning Subject Area. The modules reflect the personal interests of the core team but the overriding aim was to provide the structure for accreditation and planning of customised negotiated programmes which serve the purposes of both individual and organisation. Most of the modules within the Subject Area are themselves frameworks to be fleshed out on an individually negotiated basis rather than predetermined learning packages. Modules can be studied as stand alone units of learning or in approved combinations, once again negotiated on an individual basis, to lead to a University qualification. Thus the module development and programme approval was closely associated not only with underlying educational philosophy and research but also with the accreditation process and the regulatory framework for module approval as part of an individualised programme of study which in turn is influenced by client demand and external circumstances. It is impossible to perceive the institutionalisation of work based learning without this kind of pan-University modular resource.

Examples of these modules are given in other chapters of this book, eg. work based research methods, chapter 3; accreditation portfolio, chapter 5; learning agreements, chapter 6; and work based projects, chapter 7. Obviously all these modules had to be supported by a persuasive rational and this involved the NCWBLP team in a wide range of consultations and presentations. As argued elsewhere in this book, an institutional development of this radical nature of work based learning must be based on sound argument.

The construction and validation of the work based learning programme may be presented diagrammatically in Figure 4.1.

Of course this is not a once-for-all process. Indeed, once validated the critical issue becomes the perpetuation of the programme. This means that the programme must prove itself and thereby retale institutional commitment and the winning of the on-going political debate. Parts III and IV of this book give examples of how work based learning at Middlesex University is proving itself. Hence, many of the factors involved in the initial construction are present in a tried-and-tested manner in the reconstruction of the programme.

The Construction and Validation of an Institutional Work Based Learning Programme

Figure 4.1: Factors influencing the construction and validation of an institutional work based learning programme

External Circumstances and Developments

FORMULATION OF PROPOSAL

- Module / Programme Development
- Accreditation System
- Collaborative Links
- Research Underpinning

Proposers

POLITICAL DEBATE

- Standards and Quality
- University Awards
- Epistemological Issues
- Educational Ideology

Champions
Allies
Opponents

INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT

- Organisational Framework
- Regulatory Framework
- Investment Policy
- University Mission / Values

Senior Management
Board of Governors

Internal and External Client Demand