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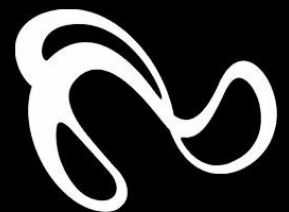
A STUDY PREPARED FOR THE
HIGHER EDUCATION ACADEMY

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Work Based Learning
at Middlesex University

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1 Executive summary

This exploratory study was carried out in the context of current literature on higher education supporting the critical role of student engagement for retention, quality of learning, achievement and graduation and as such serves as a proxy for quality. Therefore institutional efforts to increase the quality of education provision need to focus on ways in which student engagement can be enriched.

This present study adopted a holistic approach to include what the literature regards as the two main components of student engagement:

- the learner's context and motivations

- the approach and strategies of a higher education institution (HEI).

The study's primary aims were to:

- gain an understanding of the WBL student's experience

- identify any gaps that exist between current provision and expectations

- achieve indicators of good practice at institutional level to strengthen work-based learners' engagement.

A sample of seven Work Based Learning (WBL) students from the London campus, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, who graduated from Middlesex University's Institute for Work Based Learning (IWBL) in 2009, was interviewed by two independent researchers. In addition, relevant data was drawn from a student evaluation survey conducted by IWBL in July 2009. As student engagement is seen to be a dual interaction between students' expectations and institutional strategies, informal and formal conversations and interviews were also held with members of IWBL staff.

Summary of findings

WBL students at Middlesex University have a different profile from traditional students on the whole. They are usually older, experienced workers and have full-time jobs mostly in a senior capacity. They study on a part-time basis and are mainly distance learners.

It appeared that important motivational factors for learners were that:

- there are tangible outcomes attached to the achievement of a WBL degree

- the learner is the prime agent of success, giving them a sense of ownership.

The context of WBL degrees (student's own workplace, distance learning and academic adviser support) has a significant impact on the student's experience and sense of engagement, making a very different experience to that of the campus-based learner studying full-time. The key difference for students of WBL as opposed to other distance programmes offered on a part-time basis is that the context and the substance of the their study is firmly based in a work situation.

The university adviser is the fundamental link between the student and the HEI, therefore the learning experience and any academic integration with the HEI are determined largely by that relationship. The analysis showed that interaction with other students is minimal and even electronic interaction with others is not often actively sought so unlike their full-time counterparts, WBL students experience peer interaction as a marginal aspect of their engagement as learners. However, the study revealed that WBL students sought peer support and a high level of practical, emotional and intellectual support from the workplace which has to be taken into consideration in the current debate and in future studies. Such an individualised form of contact leads to vastly different experiences and perceptions of the university for learners.

In terms of practical university support, WBL students are dependent on technology but they did not always use everything that was available to them because of technical problems and the challenge of different types of software for which they had not received induction. They also did not access administration often, in some cases because they did not need to and in others because they were not familiar with the correct channels. Contact with wider university administration was often found to be irrelevant to their needs.

On account of the differences in engagement defined by the part-time and distance learning nature of WBL as well as by a different student profile, this exploratory study revealed a qualitative difference in the way that the WBL student engages. It is a dynamic process involving the interaction of the university's expectations and academic requirements and the student's involvement with and ownership of their learning. This interaction creates a unique picture of student engagement and identification in the educational space. In this context, the adviser is an interpreter of university culture rather than a mentor and a facilitator of learning who provides the appropriate support for self-directed reflection, academic development and an imperative to seek appropriate networks and sources of knowledge relevant to the needs of WBL students. This sense of ownership of and responsibility for their own learning may be what underpins the WBL student's level of sacrifice and commitment, evident in the study, to achieve their learning objectives.

On the question of identifying with the HEI, having a minimal physical and social presence contributes to having little sense of belonging as does the belief among WBL students that the campus is the domain of the 'young'. However WBL students expressed a more abstract identification of themselves as learners such as the importance they attach to getting a degree that recognises the learning they have engaged in throughout their professional life as well as academic skills gained though their engagement with the programme. For WBL students, although there is little sense of attachment to the physical space of the institution, the association and identification with 'the university' and academia in general is important, and obtaining a degree is an important signifier of this. The graduation ceremony connects them to the wider academic establishment and community of researchers.

The study found that for WBL students the most important determinants for student engagement were the:

- personal characteristics of self motivation, determination and self sufficiency

- learner-centred pedagogy which has a high degree of relevance to students' professional life and objectives and encourages ownership of learning

- support from the HEI in the form of adviser guidance and interaction

- learning resources and administrative help

- role of the workplace, with its concrete and physical presence in students' lives providing various forms of practical, emotional and intellectual support that cannot be provided by the distant university

- social networks of friends, family, work colleagues and other professional networks that play a supportive role.

Recommendations

The study indicates several areas to ensure good practice in HEIs by providing the conditions which will optimise student engagement, positive learning experience and successful outcomes.

Adviser relationship

The adviser relationship is of utmost importance and it is essential to ensure adviser availability and prompt feedback loops. Universities can contribute to this by ensuring that advisers get the support they need to do this. New approaches to learning require a changing pedagogy and advisers need training and appropriate support systems. Evaluation and development of the adviser role is a key area for future enhancement.

Extent and kind of engagement

Closer consideration could be given to the extent to which WBL students need to engage with each other and with the wider university.

On-campus induction programmes, for example, can be a helpful way of engaging with the university and meeting people starting the same programme at the same time with a view to further peer engagement. Alternatively this activity may be seen as a wasted working day, requiring travel to an event that although informative could have been done through other means. While it might enable encounters with people who could be a future source of peer support, this type of support is more likely to be sought and valued in the work situation and within existing and new networks.

When students feel they are able to effect change within their academic work they are likely to feel a greater sense of participation, identification and belonging. Allowing students to engage in the wider debate about work based learning, to contribute their knowledge through networks of alumni and current students, through publication, events and internet communications can encourage students to experience the university as a wider entity. Engagement that goes beyond the single WBL adviser through a range of university-led contact opportunities is likely to be beneficial as long as it is not too time-consuming or irrelevant.

Administration, processes and structures

University systems are currently constructed for full-time undergraduate students who are by far the majority population of most HEIs. The facilitation of more appropriate administrative processes and systems that have relevant categories and environments that

are directed towards the needs of people at work would enhance the WBL students' experience with the university.

Resources; access and content
WBL students are particularly reliant on learning materials (hard copy and online) so resources need to be comprehensive, up-to-date, organised and easily accessible with minimum technical failure and maximum technical support. The Open University's efficient style for accessing materials and making their content clear and appropriate is a distinct benefit.

Interaction between practice communities and universities
The work situation is a critical site where WBL students extend and apply their academic learning and it is also a source of support for students. Strategies can be developed for more interaction between universities and work situations. This would enable:

- an understanding by universities of the needs of contemporary work situations

- awareness-raising within organisations and work-related communities about how university learning can benefit individuals and organisations and other stakeholder groups.

Middlesex Organisational Development Network (MODNet) is an example of a development that seeks to meet these goals.

Relevance
The study suggests that taking ownership of learning is a vital aspect of student engagement. Within WBL degrees the process of ownership is largely facilitated by the relevance of the course to learners' work context and professional development. This provides an important factor for enhancing student engagement in taught courses. If students are to engage with their learning, courses need to be made relevant to them.

2 Introduction

The study is concerned with students' engagement in Work Based Learning courses in one particular university. Full awards are undertaken at all levels in WBL studies which means that work based learning is itself understood as a field of study in its own right. Assessment criteria are therefore generic criteria that can be applied to any area of study within a work-based setting and the focus of the award is negotiated in a learning agreement and shown in brackets. For example, BA (Hons) Work Based Learning Studies (Education Management). All students carry out their studies on a part-time basis and are experienced workers who base their study in their work environment.

There are many forms of work based learning in universities including work placements and awards that have WBL modules as part of the award. However, an important element of work based learning is that the focus of study is outside the university in a work context. The conclusions from this study are therefore to some extent generalisable to other work-based courses.

It is important to draw a distinction between work based learning and university-based courses when considering student engagement with the university. The literature on student engagement assumes in the most part that students are full-time undergraduates studying university-based programmes. This is discussed in relation to gaining a clear definition of student engagement and getting to the essence of what is involved in a good quality of experience for students. There follows some literature which addresses the experiences of learners studying on a part-time basis (referred to as 'part-time student') and this adds relevance to the WBL students that form this study. Finally the limited literature on WBL students' experience with their HEI is briefly reviewed.

3 Literature review

Coates (2006) finds that there has been much research on student engagement and that the quality of students' relationship with their learning is highly relevant to their success and educational development:

> Student engagement is an idea that has grown in relevance and sophistication in higher education research and practice in the last few years. The idea represents a culmination of about 30 years of research into student learning, being developed as an efficient means of organising knowledge about key aspects of the higher education student experience. While it retains this function today, increasing use and theoretical elaboration has amplified its salience in conversations about student learning and development.

Coates, p15

It is widely understood that the level and quality of student engagement with their HEIs is critical in determining student retention, learning, achievement and graduation (Laird et al, 2008; Bryson and Hand, 2008). Student engagement has also been cited as an important mediating factor in the development of students' sense of belonging to their educational institutions (Coates, 2006). It is for these reasons that Paul Ramsden, CEO, The Higher Education Academy, said of the *National Student Survey* reporting on undergraduate education in the United Kingdom:

> A high-quality student experience is the hallmark of excellent higher education. With the current pressures on the sector, it is striking that the vast majority of students are positive about the teaching they receive and about their experiences generally.

HEFCE, 2009

Institutional efforts to increase the quality of educational provision, therefore, have focused particularly on ways in which student engagement can be enriched.

In order to guide the present study, the operational definition of student engagement provided by Harper and Quaye (2008) will be adopted. They state:

> Student engagement is simply characterised as participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes.

p1

Despite the growing academic interest in student engagement in higher education, theorisations of this concept are still emergent and under contestation. Broadly, conceptualisations of student engagement encompass two dimensions that appear to be in close interaction with each other yet represent separate conceptual planes on which student engagement is manifested. On the one hand, it consists of the learner's active involvement in learning, that is, their motivations, inclinations and efforts to engage with their learning. On the other, it also consists of institutional engagement – the institutional support structures and organisational approaches that promote inclusive and open interactions with and between students (Harper and Quaye, 2008; Kuh et al 2007). Researchers and academics appear to vary regarding which of the two dimensions they emphasise in their conceptualisations of student engagement. Some focus on the learners

(Riggs and Gholar, 2009) and some on the institution (Little et al, 2009). In this study, a holistic approach is adopted that acknowledges the mutual interaction between these two factors in constructing student engagement. This approach therefore coheres with the definition provided by Kuh et al (2007):

> Student engagement represents two critical features. The first is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other educationally purposeful activities... . The second component of student engagement is how the institution deploys its resources and organises the curriculum, other learning opportunities, and support services to induce students to participate in activities that lead to the experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning and graduation.

p44

As a dynamic process, student engagement is facilitated by several factors, the most commonly cited of which are (Bryson and Hand, 2007 and 2008):

- Learner-centred classrooms that encourage autonomous and reflective learning
- Frequency and quality of student-faculty contact
- Interaction and relationships between students
- Relevance of the curriculum to students' needs and expectations
- Student expectations and perceptions of study and of their HEI

However, just as student engagement can be enhanced in different ways, there are also significant barriers to its development and maintenance including the:

- focus on performativity within higher education, wherein the instrumentalist focus on 'having' a degree as a strategic means of enhancing career opportunities takes precedence over the process of 'becoming', that is, the development of reflexivity and identity as individuals and citizens

- unfamiliarity of the HEI with its different discourses and value systems which can lead to alienation and disorientation of students

- lack of students' control over the structure and content of course material

- mass, standardised nature of higher education, further accentuated by the trend towards marketisation, where individual students are positioned as members of a homogenous mass of customers.

The facilitating and inhibiting factors identified above have largely been researched and understood in relation to student engagement within mainstream higher education in the form of taught, campus-based courses. However higher education is no longer seen to be limited to this traditional form of educational provision. Indeed as an area of emerging 'complexity' (Shaw, 2002), higher education is increasingly extending to include modes of study on a part-time basis and distance/online courses to accommodate a changing student demography that is more mobile, digitally connected, professionally established and diverse in terms of age, culture and economic background. It is likely that student engagement within these different educational contexts will show commonality with 'traditional' student engagement, but also exhibit unique features and forms as well as different strengths and challenges. For example scholarship suggests that in comparison with full-time students, students on part-time courses are faced with a multitude of work and family-related commitments that compete with the time they have available for engaging with their studies and college (Silverman et al, 2008).

The engagement of students on part-time courses also suffers because they have less time to interact with college peers and therefore do not benefit from the intellectual stimulus and emotional support such interaction provides (Yum et al, 2005). While these students perform a plethora of social roles beyond their study life, the cultivation of a sense of belonging to their institution is considered just as important for the completion of their degrees as it is for full-time students (Kember and Leung, 2004). Combating feelings of isolation is therefore integral to encouraging student engagement among students on part-time courses. Here institutional staff can play an important role by establishing friendly relations with students, providing quality teaching and facilitating student interactions on campus and within virtual learning environments (Kember et al, 2001, Wilson et al, 2004, Edirisingha et al, 2009). Given the busy lives that part-time students lead, many opt for distance courses, using internet technology which allows greater temporal and spatial flexibility and control (Chen et al, 2008). While distance learning removes practical constraints such as travel that may prevent some people from accessing higher education, it also poses problems for student engagement arising from the comparative lack of study structure and tangible institutional support (Shin and Chan, 2004). Under these circumstances, personal determination and self-discipline of the student are vital for successful completion of their programmes, as are supportive social networks of friends and family (Forrester et al, 2004).

The HEFCE (2009b) student survey found that it was not always possible to know the exact study intentions of part-time students, for example if they intended to complete a module or modules for institutional credit or for a full degree. It is therefore not always possible to gain clear statistical evidence of success in completing an award and the statistics tend to be based on the same factors as those for full-time students where intentions and goals may be quite different.

Although research on student engagement is emerging within newer modes of education, it still remains incommensurate with the increase in students drawn towards such study and the policy focus on lifelong learning which turns a spotlight on these areas of higher education. As greater demands are placed on universities to change their structures and processes to accommodate new types of flexible and distance learning, there appears to be a need for further exploration of the processes, factors and challenges of student engagement in these new fields. The emergence of WBL programmes is one such area where research on student engagement processes is required and where a limited amount of research has taken place.

Little et al (2009) found that:

> institutions view student engagement as central to enhancing the student experience, but more emphasis seems to be placed on viewing students as consumers and rather less on viewing students as partners in a learning community.

This is where WBL students may to some extent benefit in their engagement. They are invited to be partners in a learning agreement (or contract) with the university and their place of work (Garnett, 2000). The three-way partnership links WBL students into an engagement with both an HEI and a work community adding a different dimension to notions of engagement.

Although course structure and definitions of WBL differ widely at Middlesex University, where this study was carried out, WBL is defined as:

> a learning process which focuses university-level critical thinking upon work (paid or unpaid) in order to facilitate the recognition, acquisition and application of individual knowledge, skills and abilities, to achieve specific outcomes of significance to the learner, their work and to the university.

Garnett, 2005

The definition clearly centres the intellectual focus of the students' study upon their paid or unpaid work and the university acts as a facilitator and expert adviser in thinking and knowledge processes. Successful WBL students will have developed themselves successfully through university learning and have also made a significant impact on their work situation (Nixon, 2008).

Brennan (2005) found that integrating work based learning into higher education requires a whole range of supporting structures and changes of attitude towards learning. New approaches to learning require new thinking from all the stakeholders involved in university work based learning. Young and Stephenson (2007) focus on how an interactive learning environment can support work based learning while Boud and Costley (2007) show how the WBL student's experience is based on engagement with the university which requires a pedagogical approach that supports the three-way connection.

4 Methodology

Aims

The aims of the study were to:

- gain an understanding of the WBL student experience and to identify any gaps that exist between current provision and expectations

- initiate empirically based research on student engagement in the emergent field of WBL

- provide insights that facilitate the HEA's commitment to student engagement with its HEIs

- identify and guide good practice at the institutional level in order to strengthen WBL students' engagement.

Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

- explore the ways in which WBL students benefit from their engagement with their HEI

- assess the extent to which they relate to and engage with other learners

- assess the impact it has on their retention and achievement

- explore the extent to which their identification with an HEI is significant or important.

## Methods

Data collection

The Institute of Work Based Learning was selected as a case study to explore WBL students' engagement with their HEI. IWBL is a particularly appropriate site for exploring issues of student engagement in the field of WBL for several reasons. First, it has been one of the pioneers in the field of work based learning and continues to be actively engaged in developing networks to improve WBL studies nationally and internationally. Second, its achievements and contributions were recognised by HEFCE which awarded the existing work based learning centre the status of a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning of WBL in 2005. More recently IWBL has received a major award for furthering employer engagement through WBL, the Middlesex Organisational Development Network (MODNet).

A literature search was conducted to gain an overview of conceptualisations, debates and approaches towards student engagement. This was then used to inform the construction of a semi-structured interview schedule and a student survey in order to examine students' engagement with the Institute.

In line with literature that supports the conceptualisation of student engagement as a dual interaction between students' expectations and institutional strategies, informal and formal conversations and interviews were held with members of IWBL staff in order to explore its institutional approach. This methodology coheres with the holistic approach to student engagement that is adopted by this study.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with a selection of undergraduate and postgraduate students who graduated in 2009. Only students who had enrolled and completed

Figure 1 Survey respondents by age group
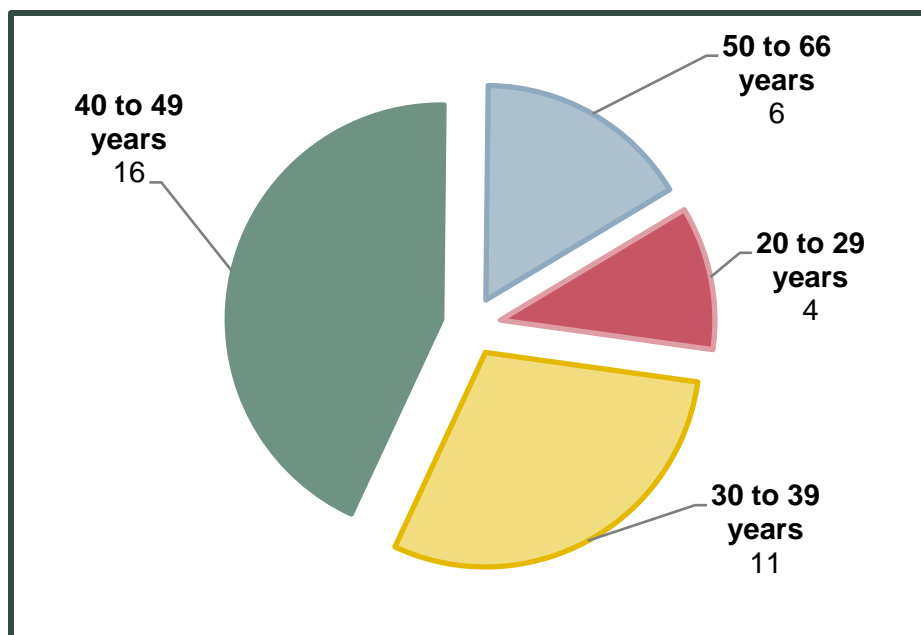
their studies at Middlesex University London campuses were included in the interview sample. Approximately 60 IWBL graduates of 2009 were sent personalised emails inviting them for face-to-face or telephone interviews. Of these, seven (one undergraduate and six postgraduate) responded positively and arrangements were made to conduct telephone interviews as per their request. Interviews were conducted by two independent researchers who had had no contact with the research participants prior to the commencement of this study.

A survey sample of 37 respondents consisted of 13 undergraduate and 24 postgraduate students all of whom completed their study programmes in January or June 2009. Of these respondents, 19 completed their studies in the United Kingdom, 3 each in Cyprus and Greece, and 1 each in Malaysia, Hong Kong, Ireland, Turkey and the United States. Of the 37 respondents in the survey, 16 respondents were in the age bracket of 40 to 49 years, with 15 below this age range and 6 above it. None of the respondents were above 66 years, while only 4 people were in the age range of 20 to 29 years (see Figure 1). The dominance of 40 to 49 year olds in the sample coheres with the age characteristics of people on the programmes in previous years.

Data analysis

The qualitative data was analysed by exploring patterns and common themes, as well as disjunctures and exceptions across the interview and survey material of all the respondents. The two researchers who collected the data initially worked independently of each other to code the interview material and then compared their codes while making necessary adjustments through a process of dialogue and discussion. The results from the interviews were then augmented and triangulated against the findings from the student evaluation survey.

Analysis was related to literature in order to contextualise the findings and to develop recommendations. Discussions and interviews with experienced members of staff informed

the evaluation of data. Two presentations to wider groups of colleagues within the university and nationally informed the final analysis.

Ethical considerations

The ethical procedures developed for this study were based on a concern to protect the privacy of all respondents and to prevent any undue pressure or negative impact to them on a personal and professional level arising from their testimonies. It was decided therefore that all respondents' names and affiliations would be kept anonymous and confidential and replaced with codes in drafts as well as the final report. This also ensured that respondents felt free to provide genuine and reliable narrations without expectations of approval or fear of disapproval.

To gain the informed consent of interviewees, all prospective respondents were emailed documents with an initial request for participation which explained the project, its context and purpose, as well as methods of data collection and analysis.

Before telephone interviews commenced, respondents were again verbally briefed about the project. To capture detailed data, all interviews were recorded subject to gaining the explicit verbal consent of respondents. Respondents were also given the option to cease the interview or recording at any time during the interview process.

5 Data analysis

Student profile and context

The students engaged in WBL degrees have a different profile compared with that of 'traditional' students (see Table 1). First, they are older and more mature in that they possess significant work experience in their respective fields. Indeed, it is the unique work experience of students on which the WBL degrees draw and around which they are structured using a process of accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL), a process through which learners and institutional staff determine the academic value of prior work experience. Because of the work-integrated nature of WBL programmes, all students are on a part-time mode of study. Though WBL students are professionally established, many have not obtained higher education degrees. Some have had no prior experience of university-level study, while others dropped out before completing their studies. Although some build on existing academic qualifications to undertake a WBL degree, others draw solely on prior work experience. In some cases, therefore, WBL masters courses are undertaken by individuals who do not have an undergraduate degree.

Table 1 Profile of interview participants

Characteristic	Number of participants
1 Length of experience in the work role related to the WBL project	0–5 years = 3 (W2, M2, M1)
	6–10 years = 2 (W3, M3)
	More than 10 years = 2 (W1, W4)
2 Highest qualifications before commencing WBL programme	Certificate/diploma = 3 (W1, W4, M3)
	BA/BSc = 2 (W2, W3)
	No degree = 2 (M1, M2)
3 Academic qualification gained at IWBL	BA/BSc = 1 (M2)
	MA/MSc = 6 (M3, W4, W3, W2, W1, M1)
4 Source of initial motivation to do a WBL degree	Previous employer = 1 (M2)
	Current/ prospective employer = 2 (W2, M1)
	Self = 4 (W1, W3, W4, M3)
5 Who paid for the programme	Employer = 1 (W2)
	Self-financed = 3 (M1,W3, M3)
	Split employer/self = 3 (W4, W1, M2)
6 Primary purpose of degree	Promotion = 1 (M3)
	Changing job role = 3 (M2, W1, M1)
	Professional development in current work role = 2 (W2, W4)
	Attaining higher qualification = 1 (W3)

Apart from this unique demography, WBL students also display noteworthy psychological strengths that are particularly required for meeting the challenges of distance and open-ended forms of higher education, such as WBL (Forrester, 2004). These characteristics include a sense of personal determination and self-discipline, as is expressed by these individuals:

> "I mean that's my character. I am quite a 'go getter'. You have to be determined to succeed, because an online degree is not easy."

W1

> "Personally I had set that goal for myself to complete the masters right from the beginning, no matter what."

M1

> "So if I decide I am going to do it I am motivated from beginning to end. You know I won't tire of it. I will complete it and I see the end goal, and I just go for it and that's it, I get it."

W4

Reasons for undertaking WBL degrees

Most WBL graduates interviewed had a clear and precise understanding of why they needed to do a degree and how it would benefit them in the future. Often the degree was undertaken on the explicit request or encouragement of current or prospective employers, as a prerequisite to allowing vertical movement towards higher paid and more prestigious jobs or horizontal movement across careers, or as part of an employer's workforce development agenda. Others had a more self-generated interest in doing a degree, arising from the need to enhance their career prospects or to improve their performance and understanding in their current work role.

The WBL format of the degree appealed to learners for various reasons. Some were looking to gain a higher academic qualification in general and chose a WBL route because it could be done at a distance and thus enabled them to continue work while adopting a flexible study pattern:

> "It had to be a distance course because I am a teacher and I had to go in and teach every day and because I live here and I have a family who live here and so I couldn't go anywhere to do it."

W3

A WBL programme was also attractive to learners because it allowed them to convert their accumulated professional knowledge into an accredited academic degree, thus some graduates were able to obtain an MA without having a prior undergraduate qualification. This is an opportunity that would not have been available through traditional courses that tend to be organised in a stage-wise progression of educational attainment, as one MA student at IWBL suggests:

> "I didn't have an undergraduate degree so the WBL degree was fantastic for me in that respect. But I do have an extremely varied and good CV... all my prior accreditation was

> through my WBL, so in that respect the formula of the WBL degree was fantastic for me because I was able to gain academic credit for a high level of professional engagement and learning."

M1

An added advantage of a WBL degree was the opportunity it gave students to extend and deepen their current professional expertise:

> "When I came across this degree (WBL) it seemed absolutely perfect because I could focus on something I really knew about and could extend."

W3

> "So I was very keen when I realised the opportunity to both recognise previous learning and to extend my present knowledge and incorporate the expertise I needed to gain in the field of education as well. So it couldn't have been a more perfect programme for that and for where I was at that point."

M1

Some individuals chose to do a WBL degree because they were seeking to introduce specific improvements and innovation in professional practice within their workplace. Their university research project became the 'real-life' project they were undertaking as part of their work role. The structured work-situated enquiry and research involved in WBL the programme was, therefore, perfectly aligned with these objectives:

> "We had brought a new programme on board for the students and I really wanted to research whether this programme was working, what were the viewpoints of all the people involved in the programme – the parents and the students involved... . So I was very *very* keen to understand all this. And doing the MA (WBL) was really the vehicle to do it. I maybe would have gone ahead and done it in any case but this pushed me ahead further into really thinking about it and setting it all out properly."

W4

Other auxiliary reasons for doing a WBL degree were related to personal development and proving one's worth, a kind of self-actualisation in a work setting and influencing change in people's attitudes and beliefs through a work based project:

> "From my personal point of view I do want to prove that even though you are a dancer or you are doing something artistic you still have a brain and you can do academic writing, so for me that was just a personal challenge really."

W4

The findings in this section suggest that there are some very concrete, well-defined and often functional reasons for undertaking WBL degrees relating to career progress and professional development. The visible outcomes attached to the achievement of WBL degrees may provide an important motivational context in which WBL students pursue their degrees. However this may not in itself be sufficient to encourage a deeper level of student engagement in learning. Indeed, research in the context of 'traditional' education suggests that instrumental approaches to learning are inimical to student engagement. As will be seen later, instrumentalist or strategic

concerns of WBL students appear to be accompanied by a sense of ownership of learning that is encouraged by the learner-centred course structure and pedagogy of WBL studies. This sense of ownership appears to be another vital motivational factor in driving students to engage with and complete their degrees.

Framework for WBL student engagement

WBL programmes are based on students' actual work as well as having a distance relationship with the university and this is reflected in the kinds of support, resources and interaction that students receive and garner for their learning. The most important source of guidance is certainly the HEI, but the workplace, with its concrete and immediate bearing on students' lives, is also a contributor. A model of student engagement is shown in Figure 2.

Institutional support, interaction and resources

Students' contact and interaction with the IWBL and the HEI in general took tangible form predominantly through their relationship with their assigned WBL adviser (commonly referred to as an 'academic adviser'). In many cases this was the sole personal relationship that students had with the HEI. The fact that communications between students and advisers were based almost entirely on email contact, supported sometimes by telephone conversations, is an important indicator of the university-related aspect of the WBL study experience. Email and telephone communications were used to ask questions, discuss ideas and get clarifications; email had the added use of enabling students to submit work and receive written feedback.

Other IWBL resources were also used to facilitate student learning. These included guidebooks and other reading material, often sent by post to students, containing the programme's structure and module content, and guidelines for planning and writing coursework. Students rarely used the on-campus library because of its distance from their workplace and residence and because of a lack of time. However, while distance library resources, including online journals and books were also available, these were not widely used due to technical difficulties with the university's Athens account which enables remote access to resources.

The WBL student evaluation survey conducted in 2009 found that only 20 per cent of respondents used the online library resources and many described their attempts to use online facilities as "frustrating". Although the HEI has pursued the development of virtual learning environments (VLEs), their structures and procedures are complex and difficult to understand. There are multiple types of software with separate purposes and functioning which require training to gain optimum benefit. Given the complexity of these online software products, one-off training courses do not fully prepare students for their use, especially among students who have had limited prior experience of using information technology in general. More sustained training sessions, however, are difficult to provide to learners that are based at a distance. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the VLEs are not used efficiently by WBL students.

On a few occasions students visited the campus for face-to-face meetings with their advisers, to attend the induction sessions and research methods modules and to present their final research projects.

Although administrative staff was another source of support that students could draw upon to deal with practical matters, they were not often approached. This may indicate the lack of administrative difficulties faced by students. Indeed, some students reported not that they did not require administrative assistance. However, it may also be suggestive of a lack of identifiable and direct channels and of visibility of the administrative staff of IWBL. Many students did not know the names of people working on the IWBL administrative team.

Figure 2 Model of student engagement

Higher education institution
Support:
- administrative
- academic

Learning resources

Workplace
Support:
- practical
- emotional
- intellectual

Academic integration

Ownership of learning

Identification with support networks

Peer interaction
Social
Professional
Intellectual

Therefore, when practical enquiries arose, students often directed these to their advisers or asked them to suggest other people who could help them. Others located administrative help by making a general enquiry through the university switchboard. Some students, however, faced more sustained administrative problems relating to the payment of their fees. In these cases they developed closer relations with individuals in the administration with whom they liaised to sort out the problem.

Students who faced administrative difficulties with fee payment found it unsettling because it led to uncertainty and loss of control over their study plan. As one student narrates:

> "I had sent off the money, I can't remember how I did that, but I put it through and it wasn't showing up on my account so I was a bit concerned that this money had got lost ... the finance department was incredibly slow in sorting it out for me. I did have to keep phoning and I went from one person to another person. Finally a lovely lady ...eventually sorted everything out for me so I didn't have any further problems at that stage. But I didn't find that they were very quick to help. So that caused me quite a lot of stress actually ... I am a very organised person and I need to know exactly where I stand."

W4

Another student was affected by delays in payment of fees by her employer. As a consequence, she was blocked from gaining access to the university's online resources. This was particularly disruptive to her as a distance learner and caused significant anxiety and a sense of alienation from the HEI:

> "I had five weeks of not being able to access my online account because of that. At that point I felt quite panicked because I wasn't able to do submissions, and lots of things besides the online library and other things... . It actually undermines the student, it really puts you back. Especially nowadays, this is a work based learning course and we are expected to access electronically."

W2

Clearly, administrative problems related to funding can have a detrimental effect on the student's study experience. The problems faced by this student indicate the importance of good coordination and communication between the HEI staff and sponsoring employers. When these are government employers, with whom traditional delays in funding have been observed, there is an added need for tolerance and flexibility on the part of the HEI.

Of the many different ways in which students could access, use and engage with the HEI, it is apparent that communications with the adviser were the most frequent, in-depth and fruitful conduit through which this occurred:

> "The contact with my tutor was fantastic. I had his email, I had his mobile number. If I ever phoned him he phoned me back and he always answered any email questions or any work that I put in very quickly, so that was really helpful."

W4

> "I felt very *very* supported by my tutor. I regularly emailed him sections of my work and he would email me back very quickly with comments and feedback."

W3

In the eventuality that an assigned adviser was unavailable for guidance or when contact was insufficient, students were generally unaware of and did not seek other sources of personal and direct support from the HEI. Within the context of work based learning studies, therefore, the adviser is fundamental to mediating student experiences and engagement with the HEI. Whereas students of campus-based taught courses have direct access to a vast array of HEI facilities and services and are in contact with a wide range of teaching faculty with whom fruitful interactions can be established, the experiences and interactions of WBL students with the HEI

are determined largely by their relationship with an individual adviser. This places a heavy onus on advisers in enabling student engagement with their learning. Such individualised forms of student interaction with their HEI also lead to vastly different experiences and perceptions of the HEI from learner to learner.

Interaction with other learners

In contrast to the various ways in which WBL students engaged with the HEI, their interaction with other learners was minimal. Lack of peer interaction was due to the:

- distance learning nature of the course

- part-time status of students

- individualised course content.

Since students were studying at a distance there were very few opportunities to meet other people:

> "I don't know whether there were opportunities for that, I mean, I know I could have come down more often if I had been able to, but whether I would have met up with anybody else who was studying like that. I mean, it seemed to me that there were quite a few people from abroad as well. So you know people are really pretty far and wide for meeting up."

W4

On rare occasions, students met each other when they visited the campus to attend short courses. However, these meetings were not prolonged or regular enough to facilitate the formation of friendships.

With their busy schedules, WBL students also did not feel they had time to maintain contacts, as is suggested by a student here as she talks about her lack of contact with other learners:

> "No I didn't. I think that is because of the nature of my work, which is just to go to school the whole day, teach and come back. It's a bit isolating, so it's difficult to find time to even phone someone."

W3

Another very important factor that explains the lack of peer interaction was the individualised content of each learner's WBL programme. Unlike students of taught courses, WBL students did not share a common academic or professional area within which ideas and thoughts could be exchanged and discussed. This lack of common ground may have reduced the relevance of peer interaction for these students. This point is illustrated again by the following student:

> "...with WBL everyone is doing something different to do with their own jobs. So having contact with others would not have been quite as relevant."

W3

While some students found the absence of peer interaction "isolating", most students did not particularly miss the lack of social and intellectual stimulation from other learners even though they acknowledged its possible benefits in providing emotional support. This lack of need for social interaction was often attributed to their focus on their studies:

> "It (lack of peer interaction) was okay. It would have been helpful for moral support but in terms of practical support it wouldn't really have helped. There are not too many people pursuing my specific area ... it didn't seem like a major loss to me."

M1

When another learner was asked whether he maintained contact with people who he had met on a course on campus, he similarly replied:

> "No. It was this distance learning thing, I was just getting on with my own thing. The final two project modules were really intense. It was just a matter of getting on with it."

M2

The focus on completing their individual projects and lack of time to engage socially explains why students did not seek and maintain interactions via email or through online forums. In contrast to the experience of 'traditional' students, peer interaction does not appear to be a central concern of WBL students and plays a very marginal role in their student engagement.

Support from the workplace

Apart from the HEI, learners' workplaces were another source of practical, emotional, and intellectual support. Practical support came in the form of full or partial funding of the WBL programme or more indirectly in that the workplace provided a resource base that could be used by employees. Thus some people used the library at their workplace rather than the HEI because it was more accessible. Since students' research projects were conducted at their workplace, colleagues sometimes provided logistical help, such as facilitating access to research participants, helping to conduct surveys and organising research related meetings and workshops. A few employers also gave study leave.

The workplace was also a source of emotional support through the encouragement shown by employers and other colleagues:

> "The head of music was supportive. He would ask how I was getting on and offer encouragement, which was really good."

M2

It also reduced feelings of isolation by filling the void in social relations arising from the distance learning nature of the WBL programme, as one learner states:

> "I think it is the nature of the course. You are kind of 'flying solo' – it feels like that. I had a work colleague who completed her masters two years ago and she was quite good, so I did have support. And I had my line manager... . So I think people who go on to this course need to be fairly grounded and have contacts already in the workplace or wherever for support."

W2

Employers and colleagues also provided intellectual support by giving advice and feedback and by discussing ideas. These people were particularly well placed to give such support because they were aware of the context of the study, perhaps more so than the WBL adviser. Their inputs were highly appreciated.

> "The support from my workplace was quite important because in my research I did the observation in my institute and I discussed the results of observing with the focus group of colleagues. With this focus group I could discuss the evolution of my project because they know the organisation, they know the way it works, the limitations and then the opportunities and it was interesting to discuss this with them and that really helped."

M3

The workplace is an important source of support to WBL students in their academic pursuit. While scholarship on student engagement focuses on the role of academic institutions in facilitating student learning, in the context of WBL studies, the important role of the workplace also needs to be acknowledged.

Processes in student engagement with WBL

While the engagement of WBL students is supported by a framework of resources, contacts and interactions, student engagement itself is constituted of deeper, dynamic processes. These processes relate to the:

- students' engagement with the university's expectations and academic requirements

- students' involvement and ownership of their learning

- imperative to engage and make a difference through project work with their organisation or professional field.

The ways in which these interconnected processes are played out in WBL studies, creates a unique picture of student engagement and identification in this educational space.

Academic integration

The first step in WBL students' engagement with their learning and their HEI was the process of encountering, trying to understand and meet academic standards, as well as grappling with self-directed learning. This equates to a process of academic integration, involving socialisation within the HEI culture and norms which, in terms of student retention, is a central determinant of whether students continue with their studies.

As discussed earlier, many WBL students have had no prior experience of university education. Initially, therefore, students had anxieties about what was expected of them and whether they would be able to meet the academic standards of a WBL degree. These worries are expressed by students below:

> "The initial thing for me, not having completed an undergraduate degree, was the real anxiety of whether it would work."

M1

> "When I started I was quite like 'in the dark'. But I did develop. Don't forget that I didn't go to university before, so I didn't have background knowledge of doing assignments, I had to learn everything from scratch."

W1

Support and feedback from the adviser and guidance from course handbooks were critical in helping students to develop a workable understanding of academic standards and expectations:

> "So, academically, the main challenge was engaging particularly with the written material and grasping the significance of the criteria... . That was really what I had to get my head around ... I had to do a lot of reading. The experience of it initially was scrambling to understand and engaging with it at the appropriate academic level... . I think I was just scrambling to engage intellectually and be sure that I was actually writing appropriately. And the tutorial support was very good for that."

M1

> "I was able to send him (adviser) drafts of what I was doing just to ensure I was pitching on the right level and I had the appropriate content."

W2

Apart from academic standards, students also had to get used to engaging in self-directed learning and develop ways of managing it, though initially some students found this quite challenging:

> "Online assignments are very difficult because you don't have a one-to one, you don't have the opportunity of speaking to the lecturer every week and the lecturer telling you 'Listen; this is what you're doing wrong, this is where you need to improve.' The assignments are difficult because you just have a marked assignment and you have to find a way of understanding it. And that what makes it much harder because you have to work for it."

W1

Learners acknowledged that they required a high level of self-sufficiency and maturity to be self-directed in their learning, indicating that such form of study might not be suited to younger students who form the bulk of the university population:

> I wouldn't have liked to have done the course, if I wasn't the kind of person who was reasonably self sufficient and could go ahead and do work. I think I would have been quite lost... . This is my style of learning ... but I think there has to be maturity and experience behind you before you do this. It wouldn't fit a newly qualified person or somebody very young I think."

W2

> "...when you don't know what you are expected to do, you have to have a strong character. In fact I was going to give up. The first six weeks I was going to give up. And because I had a supportive family who egged me on and called me a 'loser' that really shocked me. I said 'No, I can't'. I mean, that's my character. I am quite a 'go-getter'. You have to be determined to succeed, because an online degree is not easy."

W1

Students often used HEI resources such as the course handbook to structure and organise their learning:

> "One thing I learned early is you would get lost if you didn't understand what the work-based booklet was about. You really have to look at that. Everything was in there. But because it was so self-directed you really had to look in there. You have to source your own learning. There is nobody telling you what to do."

W2

As students developed a firmer understanding of academic requirements, they also gained greater confidence in being able to progress and accomplish a degree. Their reliance on the support and guidance from the tutor reduced and students increasingly took the front seat in managing their studies.

> "Yes, I suppose I would have spoken to my tutor in the first stages maybe once every two weeks. Then it wasn't at all ... I hardly contacted him once I got going. At that point then I would be sending finished work for approval... . As long as I'm sure that I am doing the right thing and the work is at the right standard, I prefer just to get on with it."

W4

Internalising the university's standards, expectations and norms of academic discourse were essential in enabling them to engage more fully with their learning and to galvanise their own self-motivation towards completing the degree.

> "Well I was not convinced at all that I would be up to the standard of an MA because you know I am not into academic writing at all... . When I sent examples of my things to my tutor, he completely convinced me that I would be able to do it. And certainly after the first term of him sending back things and him telling me that I was completely on the right track my confidence grew and I wasn't nervous anymore. It is just that I didn't know the standard expected in an MA level, that was the only thing."

W4

This is not to suggest that the adviser's support became irrelevant. Indeed, it continued to be valued in that students felt "supported" when they had this guidance and "less supported" when they did not. However, if for some students the initial phase of establishing contact with the adviser and through this, socialisation within the academic culture, does not go smoothly or remains weak, doubts regarding their desire to continue the programme become stronger and may lead to a less positive perception of the study experience.

This occurred in the case of one individual whose contact with his adviser was unsatisfactory:

> "I was frustrated because I didn't think I was getting the advice that I needed. I was struggling to get in touch with my adviser a lot of the time."

M2

Weak support from the adviser contributed to the student's difficulty in understanding the academic standards that were expected and resulted in disappointing grades on a module submission:

> "When I first attempted it (RAL module) I thought I had done enough work to get the amount of credit I was looking for. But it turned out I hadn't and I struggled a lot. At that point I didn't think I was getting enough information as to what they were looking for and I found that really frustrating."

M2

These feelings of alienation led this student to consider withdrawing from the programme but encouragement from a close friend who "convinced me to keep going" prevented the student from doing so.

The role of the WBL adviser and the HEI is one of introducing and familiarising WBL students with the academic culture, rather than providing directed mentoring in the traditional sense. Therefore, the HEI in the context of WBL studies is a background facilitator of learning by providing a more structured support that is conducive to self-directed reflection and academic development.

Taking ownership of learning

Another indicator of student engagement in WBL studies is the process of students taking ownership and responsibility for their learning. This process is particularly encouraged by the learner-negotiated course content of the WBL degrees.

As was demonstrated earlier, many students were driven to do a WBL degree because it gave them the ability to exercise greater choice and control over the content of their learning and the award was significant for their work. Learners could draw and build on their prior work experience while also channelling the learning gained during the degree back into the workplace in ways that were immediately relevant to their professional life. The high degree of choice and control in constructing their learning objectives and the immediate relevance of the course to their work role enabled students to experience an important sense of ownership of their learning which they did not feel they could experience within traditional taught courses.

> "I think it is (WBL degree) very different to taught courses which are broader. This way it was my focus and what I wanted to do within my own work area. I mean obviously I had direction and tutorials to point me in the right direction to do proper research ... but I felt very much like this is my topic, my subject, something that I was very interested in and I was allowed to do that. So I didn't feel like I had to choose from a pot of other titles that might not be connected to my workplace."

W2

> "I was looking around for all sorts of things to do and I particularly wanted to do something of my own choice because with the Cert Ed you are forced into studying certain aspects which sometimes you might not be interested in – you'll do it, but you are not interested. But I wanted to do something that was very relevant to my particular work so this suited me perfectly, this one."

W4

Conversely, one learner felt less engaged when modules within the WBL degree had a taught element:

> "The academic programme itself made absolute sense in the way that it was structured and I could see where it was going ... but the middle bit sagged a bit because it was closer to being a taught thing. So my personal nature would be when I am asked to engage in and exercise my own autonomous decision I am more motivated to do things, when they are for myself. Although I wouldn't say that is any reflection on the quality of the modules, the middle ones felt a little more like a chore".

M1

The flexible structure of WBL degrees meant that students could organise their study time according to their own schedules. For some students this further facilitated a sense of ownership over their learning:

> "I didn't have to be coming down to Middlesex for regular tutorials, it all seemed to be in my hands you know, and with full-time work, my time was quite limited for studying so I had to put certain chunks of time aside to study... . And as long as I met my deadline it was up to me when I did that work and I just felt incredibly comfortable with the way it worked out, and I didn't ever feel pressurised by it... ."

W2

The sense of ownership and responsibility that students had towards their learning was visible in their active initiation of contact with the adviser and work colleagues when required, as is suggested in these extracts:

> "During my work if I couldn't understand I would contact my tutor again".

W1

> "I had to make demands on people's time and get appointments, which I did do to some extent. I did get help from other bodies but with practical aspects like doing the survey work... ."

M1

Active engagement of students with their learning could also be seen in the manner in which they created time to study, in spite of hectic work schedules, by sacrificing personal, family and social time. Here some students describe these sacrifices:

> "If it means putting in extra I would do it. I will give up social events and everything; there is always time for that kind of thing."

W4

> "Sometimes I would stay on late adding an extra hour to my working day, and quite often coming to work on a Saturday so I could do work on this because working at home wasn't an option, too many disturbances."

W2

> "I think it is very important that the timing is right as a mother studies. The timing has to be right because the children suffer and, especially for single mothers, children would suffer. I am not a single mother and mine suffered tremendously because I wasn't there to prompt them to study, you know. So it's the biggest disadvantage for a working mother to study as well."

W1

Identification with the HEI

The distance learning nature of WBL degrees has a strong bearing on the extent to which learners feel a sense of identification with their HEI. As mentioned earlier, WBL students have little physical contact with the HEI as a whole; their interactions are mostly limited to their individual WBL advisers. The physical remoteness of the HEI also limits students' involvement in the social aspects of student life such as making friends and participating in social events. For most students this lack of physical and social presence of the campus in their lives contributed to a lack of sense of belonging to the HEI.

> "Well I suppose because it is such a long way away ... so I don't feel a connection."
>
> *W4*

> "...I didn't really feel I was at university. I didn't really think I was part of the social fabric of the whole thing because it was distance learning. So I wasn't that involved socially."
>
> *M2*

> "One of my connections was the tutor basically. But because I didn't have physical access to the university I wasn't involved in it anyway."
>
> *W2*

However the lack of connection to the HEI was not simply a result of physical isolation. Students also perceived the university as a 'young' space which they, as mature people, did not fully feel part of.

> "...I must say I saw the differences with mature students that we don't feel quite part of it as the full-time students do. So, it's always a different experience. So I wouldn't say I would ever really at this stage access any of the student sites or really the general university and you know what's available on campus all that stuff goes on."
>
> *W2*

Therefore, for most WBL students, engagement in terms of experiencing a sense of belonging or community with their particular HEI is relatively weak. This can be attributed in large part to their physical and social isolation from the campus as well as their own perceptions of themselves as older students for whom 'university life' is not relevant.

On the other hand, students of WBL studies expressed a more abstract identification of themselves as learners. This was visible in the importance they attached to getting a degree as recognition of the learning they had engaged in throughout their professional life and the academic skills they had gained through the course of their studies.

> "In fact it (the degree) helps you discover what your work is all about. It wasn't just learning it was experiencing it and putting it on paper."
>
> *W1*

> "I think one of the positive things for me was my huge lift in confidence in my own academic writing and I do recognise completely from the beginning to the end my own writing improved dramatically, you know, that my understanding, the clarity of what I was writing certainly improved I felt, and I think that was one of the best things.
>
> *W4*

On a personal level, graduating made a profound impact on the learner's sense of self-worth and ability, not simply within their profession but in all aspects of their life.

> "There are so many aspects of my professional life that were in place already that I should have been able to take that sense of confidence and sense of personal fulfilment from, but to be honest I hadn't. So actually I can't think of anything else that could have filled that gap."
>
> *M1*

> "For a long time I didn't have a degree so I felt slightly inferior even though I was working and I was doing my own thing... . I had to prove to myself that I could do it, achieve academically... . I think it gave me a lot of self-belief and confidence. I'm quite pleased with myself."

M2

Though students might not have a strong sense of attachment to their particular educational institution, it appears that association and identification with academia in general is important to WBL students and obtaining a degree is an important signifier of this.

The graduation ceremony was, therefore, an important event for students because it was here that they got a tangible experience of their isolated study as connected to a wider academic establishment and community of learners. The social affirmation and recognition that they got from this experience added to their sense of accomplishment.

> "I think it [graduation ceremony] kind of closes it and finishes it and makes it feel real. Because you are sort of at home, teaching, doing a bit of this work ... then going back to teaching, getting feedback, getting marks on paper. But you don't really feel you are part of a university in a way because you are at home. And I suppose this made it real for me – to go there and have your name called out and be given the piece of paper and be part of it. It made me feel like I really had done it."

W3

> It [graduation ceremony] gave me a positive experience and visual memory to round off having done what in the end was a challenging programme for me personally, and a satisfactory one. And that gave me a focus and a way of encapsulating all in one event... . And it really brought it to life and made me feel that it was an achievement, to be there with other people who had done it as well and realised the significance of it."

M1

Students' identification of themselves as learners and researchers could also be seen in the way in which they expressed a sense of solidarity with other researchers. Thus when asked why respondents had chosen to take part in the study, many replied that this was because they now understood what it means to do research and were aware of the difficulties that researchers encountered in getting interviewees.

> "I suppose the thing is that when you have done research yourself you know partly how important it is for people to actually join in some research and, you know, be helpful to other people if they are conducting some research."

W2

> "It was so hard to gather primary data for my research. I realised just how difficult and just how important it is to get people to respond. The only really meaningful information you can get is from people. So that's the reason I was keen to do the interview, was because of that."

M1

Key factors arising from interviews

The analysis presented suggests that various factors affect student engagement in the field of work based learning studies. These are:

- personal characteristics of learners (self-motivation, self-sufficiency)

- learner-centred pedagogies and programme structure

- relevance of the study to professional and career development

- support from the HEI

- support from the workplace

- social networks outside of the HEI.

In the context of work based learning studies, the personal characteristics of learners are an important determinant of student engagement, more so than within traditional, campus-based education. To meet the challenge of distance learning, students need to have high levels of self-motivation, determination and self-sufficiency. The learner-centred pedagogy of work based learning and learning content which has a high degree of relevance to students' professional and career objectives, encourages students to take ownership and responsibility for their learning and so also contributes to student engagement.

Support from the HEI in the form of adviser guidance and interaction, learning resources and administrative help is another critical factor in student engagement. Through this support, learners gain an understanding of HEI standards and norms and achieve academic integration which is vital to student retention and achievement. The workplace, with its concrete and physical presence in learners' lives, also facilitates their engagement by providing various forms of practical, emotional and intellectual support that cannot be provided by the distant university. Social networks of friends, family and work colleagues play a similar supportive role.

6 Evaluation of survey results

Motivation

Students often described more than one motivation for undertaking a WBL degree. A general desire for professional development was cited often as were more concrete motivations such as the need to attain a higher qualification or broader career enhancement and job progression. Great salience of self-development was cited as a motivation almost as frequently as other factors. One respondent reported that they did the programme because they were required to do it by their employer ("I had to do it"). A significant minority (4 out of 37) also referred to the flexible and inclusive nature of the programme as a critical factor in enabling them to undertake the programme and thus reportedly experienced this as a motivator.

The factors that students most commonly cited as motivators to complete the programme were:

- a desire to succeed
- personal determination
- support from the adviser
- relevance of the programme to their work.

Other important factors were the institutional support that IWBL provided in terms of learning materials, and the encouragement of family and friends. Only one person cited support from the workplace as a key factor in enabling completion of their programme.

Effect on work

In total, 54 per cent of respondents described a positive influence of the programme upon their work at the time of study, while another 19 per cent reported the programme to have had a strongly positive effect. Perhaps an indication of a gestation period in which learning matures and takes effect, an even larger majority of people (89 per cent) suggested that they were using the learning they gained since finishing their study. Most respondents (86 per cent) affirmed that the learning from the programme has enabled them to work effectively or more effectively, with a similar percentage stating that they either reflect on their learning from work sometimes or all the time. A few respondents (13 per cent) stated their WBL projects were used in the workplace for 6 to 12 months, while the majority (56 per cent) saw their projects used in their workplace for longer than this.

Most respondents (81 per cent) stated that the WBL programme enabled them to identify learning opportunities at work at least sometimes. The programme facilitated this by developing students' reflective and research skills in order to open new doors for professional and career development. Slightly more than half of the sample (51 per cent) reported that their studies had affected their work role, while 59 per cent stated that they had accessed the WBL programme at the stage of career progression rather than career commencement or change. This finding correlates with the fact that only 31 per cent of the sample had changed their jobs or been promoted since completing their studies.

To summarise, these results suggest that the WBL programme was related more to developing learning skills that enhance performance and are directly beneficial to the workplace rather than in terms of helping graduates identify career opportunities for personal gain.

Development of skills

Almost all students reported that they had developed their intellectual skills to at least an above-average level, if not higher. The skills viewed to be most highly developed by respondents were "self-appraisal and reflection on practice" and "self-directed learning". More than 80 per cent of respondents indicated that they had also gained practical academic skills in the course of doing their WBL programmes, in particular "planning a work based learning project", "identification and use of resources of knowledge" and "understanding ethical issues".

Apart from developing their intellectual and practical academic skills, 69 per cent of respondents believed that reflecting on their work helped them in other ways also, for example:

- being more self-critical and aware on an everyday basis

- understanding and analysing team interactions

- developing better written and oral communication with peers.

A significant percentage of the sample (77 per cent) indicated that they had continued to use reflection as a learning tool since completing their WBL programme, for example in management situations, when teaching their students or in developing interview techniques.

Resources

Only 27 per cent of respondents stated that they used the university's library, while a similarly low percentage (24 per cent) reported using the Athens account to access online articles. It is possible that students use libraries closer to their areas of work since 70 per cent of the sample indicated that they had access to other libraries, for example, through work. A total of 89 per cent felt that they would have accessed online learning materials had they been available.

Of the survey sample, 64 per cent of students have attended teaching sessions on campus or at an international centre and 22 per cent went to WBL sessions at their workplace. For 55 per cent of respondents, sessions (at any venue) fully met their learning needs. They were then asked to identify their preferred time for attending on-campus training sessions, if given the opportunity. The mixed responses did not identify a common time preference:

- evenings, 37 per cent

- weekends, 34 per cent

- daytime, 29 per cent.

Support

In total, 84 per cent of respondents were either very satisfied or satisfied with the tutoring support during the programme; 16 per cent were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. It was felt by 32 per cent of the sample that they could not get academic support when they needed it.

Some respondents (32%) considered they had an 'excellent' or very good academic support whereas 11 per cent commented that they had poor or inadequate support from their academic advisers. The positive comments were focused mostly on prompt responses and good quality feedback from the academic advisers.

At least half of the respondents (54 percent) stated that they had enough or adequate support from work. Of the sample, 30 per cent had a work mentor and of these, 40 per cent found their

mentors very helpful and 15 per cent found them helpful to some degree in relation to their academic learning needs. These percentages sum up to slightly more than half of the respondents with mentors.

Progression

Many respondents (65%) considered the structure of the programme to have met their learning needs. In relation to the same question:

- 32 per cent stated that some of their learning needs were met

- 89 per cent stated that they felt they were able to choose to study topics of their own interest

- 22 per cent of respondents found that there were subjects or topics areas or modules that they would have liked included in their programmes.

Only 8 per cent of respondents stated that they had 'problems' progressing through the programme, while 57 per cent stated they had 'some problems'.

In total, 92 per cent indicated that their learning agreement fully or mostly met their personal learning needs, and 80 per cent felt that their learning agreement fully or mostly met their work needs. For 66 per cent of respondents, the learning agreement completely or to some degree helped them in their workplace to complete their programme whereas 11 per cent stated that it had no relevance at all.

Only a few respondents suggested some change and addition for future WBL programmes, such as a more job specific curriculum including maths, English, nursing and teaching. An assessment of career change opportunity and a stronger relation between APEL and personal development were among the suggestions.

Benefits

About half (51 per cent) of the survey respondents stated that they had a very good learning experience and a further 43 per cent considered their learning experience during their WBL programme to be satisfactory or adequate. The percentage of learners who considered their learning experience to be inadequate was 5 per cent.

One of the most commonly quoted benefits of undertaking a WBL programme was gaining confidence and self-esteem in both personal and professional lives; 32 per cent of the sample cited this aspect of their degree outcome. Gaining academic qualifications and a degree stood out as the second most commonly cited benefit (28 percent). Benefits in terms of changing jobs remained relatively low (12 percent) and 46 per cent of respondents felt that the programme had benefited their organisation. One commonly cited benefit was introduction of a new programme and curriculum. Other benefits listed were:

- an increase in effectiveness and efficiency

- introduction of new assessment methods

- improved relationships with colleagues.

7 Recommendations

Adviser relationship

The adviser relationship is of utmost importance and it is essential to ensure adviser availability and prompt feedback loops. The initial period of doing and writing assignments is a critical time in the student's academic integration. During this period, when learners are still unsure of academic standards, the adviser should be readily available and attentive to students' queries, and prompt in providing feedback.

While advisers need to be cognisant of the vital role they play in student engagement, universities must encourage an ethic of care and responsibility towards learners. At an organisational level, universities should ensure that advisers are able to set aside enough time for support beyond the research and administrative activities they may be involved in.

Universities can ensure advisers get the support they need to advise WBL students effectively. New approaches to learning require a changing pedagogy and advisers need training and appropriate support systems. Evaluation and development of the adviser role is a key area for future enhancement.

Extent and kind of engagement

Closer consideration could be given to the extent to which WBL students need to engage with each other and with the wider university. On-campus induction programmes, for example, can be a helpful way of engaging with the university and meeting people starting the same programme at the same time with a view to further peer engagement. Alternatively this activity may be seen as a wasted working day, requiring travel to an event that although informative could have been done through other means. While it might enable encounters with people who could be a future source of peer support, such support is more likely to be sought and valued in the work situation and within existing and new networks.

When students feel they are able to effect change within their academic work they are likely to feel a greater sense of participation, identification and belonging. Allowing students to engage in the wider debate about work based learning, to contribute their knowledge through networks of alumni and current students, through publication, events and internet communications can encourage students to experience the university as a wider entity. Engagement that goes beyond the single WBL adviser through a range of university-led contact opportunities is likely to be beneficial as long as it is not too time-consuming or not relevant.

In the light of what WBL students say about managing their time, their self-motivated stance and their support coming primarily from the workplace, further research could be conducted among students and potential students to explore whether they would prefer more contact with the HEI, what kind of contact and what would be helpful to promote that contact.

Administration, processes and structures

University systems are currently constructed for full-time undergraduate students who are by far the majority population of most HEIs. University procedures, for example, making complaints, should be made clear. Since WBL students have full-time jobs that keep them busy, their complaints should be followed up in a fast and efficient manner with explanations given for why

the problem occurred and what remedial steps will be put in place. When students feel they are able to effect change within their academic institution they are likely to feel a greater sense of participation, identification and belonging to it.

The HEI needs to provide the student with systems and processes that meet the needs of WBL students for example appropriate channels of communication for people in full-time work, wider administrative facilities including finance and fees. The facilitation of more appropriate administrative processes, systems that have relevant categories and environments that are directed towards the needs of people at work would enhance the WBL students' experience with the university.

Resources: access and content

WBL students are particularly reliant on learning materials (hard copy and online) so resources need to be comprehensive, up-to-date, organised, easily accessible with minimum technical failure and maximum technical support.

While WBL students study at a distance they are often particularly reliant on online learning materials. HEIs, therefore, need to make sure that these resources are comprehensive, up-to-date, organised and easily accessible. Virtual learning environments play a crucial role in that sense since discussion forums and online chat opportunities provide a socialising environment for WBL students. VLEs provide an interactive space for engaging with learning material but comprehensive training courses are essential if learners are to use these effectively. This training should be made available at the beginning of their course but also at regular intervals during the course so as to provide timely and convenient support. Prompt support services could be made available to help students encountering technical difficulties.

Online and/or offline newsletters can be sent out to students informing them of research and events happening in their department. This may provide a more tangible picture of the HEI as a real place which is otherwise difficult to experience when students are physically so far removed. It can also give them a sense of the wider context in which they are doing their studies and of which they are a part.

Open-University style efficiency to accessing materials and their clear and appropriate content is a clear benefit.

Interaction between practice communities and universities

As the work situation is a critical site where WBL students extend and apply their academic learning and is also a source of support for the student, strategies can be developed for more interaction between universities and work situations.

HEIs could focus more on developing strategies to accommodate the needs of this unconventional type of learner. MODNet is a very recent attempt to link organisations, businesses and the HEI in terms of providing the education, training and accreditation for:

- businesses to support WBL engagement and benefits for their individual workers and for their organisation

- HEIs to benefit from and respond to the substantial and varied experiences of the requirements of businesses in highly competitive markets.

Such engagement through MODNet is likely to promote partnership with business organisations which can accelerate the university's strategies to widen the WBL community and to meet the needs of individual learners and their organisations.

Universities could have more interaction with the workplace given that this is an important site where learners extend and apply their academic learning. Since student-workers physically attend their workplace, the possibility of extending the university's library resources to the workplace might be considered in order to increase students' accessibility to these resources.

Extended engagement between universities and communities of practice would enable both the needs of contemporary work situations to be understood by universities and the raising of awareness with organisations and communities about how university learning can benefit individuals and communities of practice.

Relevance

The study suggests that taking ownership of learning is a vital aspect of student engagement. Within WBL degrees this process of ownership is facilitated in large part by the relevance of the course to learners' work context and professional development. This provides an important factor for enhancing student engagement in taught courses. If students are to engage with their learning, courses need to be made relevant to them.

To increase the relevance of university education to students, course content and advising, needs to be framed in ways that encourage students to draw connections between abstract discipline knowledge and the real-world context they live in. Beyond this, lecturers should pay greater attention to enabling students to draw out the ways in which course material is personally, socially and politically significant to themselves and their fields of work.

Overall, student engagement in the field of WBL differs from more traditional forms of higher education. WBL students experience a more individualised and self-motivating form of engagement which is mostly an outcome of their level of professional experience, maturity and expectations from a degree programme.

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