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Introduction

Ruth Helyer

What is this book about?

Undertaking Higher Education (HE) is a challenge for everyone, but it becomes more complex if you spend the majority of your time at work, with little time for study and limited experience of formal education. Work-based learning (WBL) appears in HE in various formats – you might be studying for an honours degree via a Work-Based Studies programme, or undertaking a much shorter award; your course might be delivered on a campus, at your place of work, online, or by some combination of these; it may or may not include gaining credit for learning you have already undertaken. Whatever the details, this handbook covers the key areas you need to know about and offers you invaluable advice to ensure that you maximise your WBL experience; so dip in and out of it, finding what you need when you need it. You don’t have to read everything at once, or in a definitive order.

Because the book’s chapters have been put together by WBL experts from a variety of universities and organisations they are filled with diverse examples of leading practice, presented as case studies and scenarios in which real people benefit from engaging with HE-level work-based learning. The students cited show how to thrive in a learning environment, while employed and juggling personal commitments – despite mostly not having attended university at 18 or undertaken ‘A’ levels. There are also numerous activities and exercises for you to try, tick-lists for you to use and ‘hints and tips’ designed to make the learning process easier for you.
What is Work-based Learning (WBL)?

The information provided about WBL is designed to help you place your own experience in context; it will also help you to describe your learning journey to your line manager, colleagues, family and friends. Boud and Solomon (2001) summarise the major characteristics of HE work-based learning as follows. Not all of these will apply to your circumstances, but they give a flavour of the potential of work-based learning as a powerful development tool:

1. A partnership between an external organisation and an educational institution is established (contractual agreements).
2. The learners involved are employees (negotiate learning plans).
3. The learning programme followed derives from the needs of the workplace and the learner, and not from a pre-defined academic curriculum.
4. The learning programme will be individually adapted to each learner according to their previous educational experience, work experience and training.
5. Learning is taking place as an integrated part of projects/tasks in the workplace.
6. The learning outcomes are assessed by the educational institution (Boud and Solomon, 2001).

Work-based learning is what is ‘learned’ by working – not reading about work, or observing work, but actually undertaking work activities. Interactions with others are often crucial to your learning (see Chapter 9 for a discussion of social learning). Reading and research will still be involved, especially if you’re aiming for a formal qualification; this is learning from real work and real life and accepting how inextricably linked those activities are. As the sophistication and level of your job increases, so does the likelihood that you will also be undertaking research and studying theory.

Your ‘work’ may not be full-time paid employment. Perhaps you are learning in a work placement, or as a volunteer. WBL involves many diverse students who are actively doing the things they’re learning about (and actively learning from this doing). You learn in your workplace and/or the classroom, further supported by electronic and mobile technologies. Increasingly communication between you, your tutors and your peers will be carried out online, and your university or college will offer you introductory support and skills sessions to make sure you get the most out of these new and developing technologies (see Chapter 1 for HE skills and Chapter 8 for social media learning tools).

WBL commonly uses the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) to recognise, acknowledge and accredit learning from previous experience and qualifications. This reduces the amount of time taken to obtain an award (and potentially also the cost if this means that you undertake fewer modules) (see Chapter 5). As a WBL student gaining credit towards your award through
RPL is especially empowering if you initially felt out of place and in a hurry at university; there need be no such thing as ‘missing your chance’. You may also find that you are able to include, in your programme, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities that you undertake anyway (see Chapter 6).

As well as the unusual aspects of being a WBL student you will also benefit from the traditional outcomes of HE – the development of intellectual, personal, critical and analytical skills, which will support and complement your practical skills and knowledge. You are likely to have much more life experience than an 18-year-old student; furthermore you will probably find that your student peers in your class or study group differ widely in age, background and aspirations (this can even be the case when you are all from the same company). However, as motivated, employed people prepared to work hard in order to successfully fit studying into already busy lives you will also have much in common. Because HE-level WBL programmes take account of your existing knowledge and expertise they are the best, and certainly most time-effective, HE study route for you. Some of WBL’s best features are that it:

- Acknowledges skills and knowledge gained at work.
- Maximises your time (a) – via RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) and APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning) (Chapter 5).
- Maximises your time (b) – by integrating existing and ongoing workplace CPD and projects (Chapters 6 and 12).
- Combines education and development – for the ‘real’ world (Chapter 2).
- Offers networking opportunities – your peers will all be employed too (Chapters 8 and 9).
- Links you into routes to various HE awards (Chapter 4).

And the key characteristics of WBL programmes?

- Use your work role to provide/inform the curriculum (Chapter 6).
- Focus on your individual learning plan/contract/agreement (Chapter 6).
- Facilitate cross-disciplinary working, spanning subjects and sectors (Chapters 4 and 12).
- Actively recognise and accredit prior learning, both experiential (learning gained first hand through doing) and certificated (from previous relevant qualifications) (Chapter 5).
- Acknowledge that learning is taking place in diverse locations (Chapters 3, 8 and 10).
- Offer flexibility re: time, place and style of study, for example, there may be off-campus, out of hours and electronic options (Chapter 8).
- Allow longer (and looser) timeframes in which to complete awards (Chapters 4, 5 and 6).
- Encourage negotiation of title, and content, of award (Chapters 4 and 6).
- Keep compulsory modules and campus attendance to a minimum, while still offering plenty of support (Chapter 7).
- Offer generic skills modules – invaluable whatever your job role or career stage (Chapters 1 and 2).
- Operate beyond the academic calendar – for example, many recruit and run modules more than once a year.
- Support reflective practice and self-analysis (Chapters 2 and 6).
- Offer innovative methods of learning, teaching and assessment (Chapter 11).
- Utilise technology, e-learning, distance learning, peer-learning and social learning (Chapters 8 and 9).

Graduates of work-based studies programmes frequently state that they could never have undertaken HE-level study without such a route:

‘I could never have obtained my degree without a scheme like this. I left school with no qualifications and never felt like I could belong at university. The work-based studies programme proved me wrong! It is so flexible, it meant I could attend sessions and tutorials after work. I also completed a lot of the assignments at home, at work and in the library, and based all of my major submissions on work tasks that I would have had to complete as part of my job, even if I wasn’t studying.’ (Student A)

They also offer an ideal progression route, if you already hold a smaller award (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6); or some kind of professional qualification that you can, potentially, accelerate to full honours degree status. The multiple step-on and step-off points characteristic of WBL programmes make this possible. Schemes often use a skeleton structure (see Chapter 4 for more information on this as well as the example below), which can be ‘fleshed out’ in ways flexible enough to meet your individual requirements.

**Example**

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<th>Optional modules</th>
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<td>Core modules</td>
<td>Optional modules</td>
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The remaining credits needed will come from a combination of RPL/APL claims; taught modules; skills modules; WB projects; and open and independent learning.
(See Chapter 4 for further information on frameworks, including masters and doctoral levels.)

**Example Student B**

Student B is an employed process engineer with a Higher National Diploma (HND) in Mechanical and Electrical Engineering. She obtained this within five years of enrolling (there are usually regulations around the age of qualifications). She joined the Work-based Studies programme at her local university when she found out that her HND could count towards a BSc in Engineering Studies. The table below shows how she completed her programme of study. She obtained 120 credits at Level 4 and a further 50 credits.
at Level 5 by matching the precise learning gained from her HND against the learning outcomes of her new course. She then gained further credits at Level 5 for undertaking a core module about the process of recognising, and claiming for, prior learning (this module carries 20 credits, but through its assessment process – a portfolio of evidence – she was able to claim a further 50 credits at Level 5 for her experiential learning). This completed the equivalent of the first and second year of traditional undergraduate full-time study. At Level 6 she studied a taught module about continuing professional development (20 credits, evening attendance), undertook ‘Research Methods’ (20 credits, evening attendance), an engineering module (20 credits, day release) and two work-based projects, one carrying 20 credits and one 40. The large project, equivalent to a dissertation, involved developing a completely new process for her employer. This student was awarded a 2:1 classification for her BSc in just two years.

### Example: BSc in Engineering Studies: Student B (see above)

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<th>Level</th>
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<th>Credit awarded via APL</th>
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<td>50 20 50</td>
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<td>Require 120 at each level</td>
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<td>Level 6 Honours</td>
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<td>Require 120 at each level</td>
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<td>Graduation</td>
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Who studies this way?

_Insufficient time to study full-time?_

‘[WBL] is an ideal solution if you can’t commit to full-time study but have the right experience. I’d tell anyone to go for it.’ (IT Trainer to Primary School Teacher)

_Thinking of your next career move?_

‘[T]he opportunity to obtain credits for prior learning and professional work-based experience means that my Business Management degree not only reflected my experience and career path as a professional police officer but will benefit me in being considered for other managerial roles outside policing.’ (Police Inspector)

_Want to accelerate your career in a limited time frame?_

‘I was a teaching assistant, but always wanted to teach; the Work-based Studies programme acknowledges my teaching experience and existing qualifications. I’ve been able to fast track myself; what should technically have been eight years of study has been reduced to three years. I’ve also personalised my programme to suit my areas of interest, Special Educational Needs.’ (Teaching Assistant to Teacher)

_Would benefit from presenting existing workplace projects in an academic format?_ (Chapter 12)

‘I wanted to do an Engineering degree, but also choose my own relevant modules. The [WBL route] allowed me to do this and also claim credit for areas of major experience and learning, as well as transfer my previous qualifications into university credits, in effect, reducing my study time and fees. Choosing specific modules to suit my employment needs has been ideal. I’m a process engineer, responsible for the productivity and optimisation of manufacturing equipment. On this degree pathway I can learn more about managing engineering projects and process improvements, as well as taking standard technical modules.’ (Engineer)

The comments from these students show how varied the backgrounds and expertise of work-based learners are; the networking opportunities and shared practices you will gain from being part of a HE WBL community will really enrich your learning experience (Chapter 9).

You are probably older than the traditional HE student, but this is _not_ the hindrance new WBL students often presume it will be. You have a head start on the wisdom and skills front, and the experience of practical applications. This is your chance to build on all of this by connecting your new educational goals to your professional and personal experience. You might feel that you need to make an extra effort to catch up on the theory and abstraction side of things, but this is worth the effort; there is always more to learn, and it really enhances your workplace practice. WBL students tend to have a goal-orientated and structured approach, an attitude that ensures the achievement
of great things through engagement with HE, not least because of your professional approach to being assessed (Chapter 11).

What’s so good about Higher Education anyway?

HE-level learning carries credit; this makes it possible to offer you awards and qualifications. There is a system in place to track and quantify what you have learned and to compare this learning to other learning of a similar level of difficulty and complexity. Credit is used in the HE sector as a portable, international ‘currency’. Because HE-level learning carries credit, your study pathway is flexible, adaptable, valued, tailor-made and tied into a recognised quality system. The HE credit system recognises successful completion of modules, courses and programmes.

Why are you engaging with Work-based learning?

WBL is:

- Bespoke – designed around your needs.
- Relevant – connects to your real workplace activities.
- Student focused – the emphasis is on what you want/need to learn.
- Credit-bearing – has a discernible worth attached, recognisable globally.
- Added value – encompasses your work and life needs and interests – the qualification can feel like a bonus.
- Realistic – in terms of flexible timescales and feasible expectations.
- Supported – your employer will see the benefit and may support with mentorship, time off, assistance with fees (ask your line manager).
- High status – HE award could bring promotion, pay rise, new job.
- Ongoing – ties into progression and your continuous development.
- Enjoyable – it really can be! You have such an influence on the content.
- Cutting edge – you learn, develop and use innovative, new practice.
- Different – this is not ‘run of the mill’ – it is largely what you make it.

Key subjects and activities across chapters of this book

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