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# Stories from the front line

## Unlocking the voices of students and employers engaged in innovative postgraduate work-based learning programmes in English universities

Paul J. Smith and Jonathan M. Scott

**Abstract:** *This paper explores the views that students and employers have on innovative work-based learning (WBL) programmes in English higher education. The experiences of both students and employers were analysed methodologically, using the organizational story-telling framework (Gabriel, 1999). The themes that have emerged are learning support, organizational issues, links between the WBL programme and the workplace and barriers to change. The paper concludes with recommendations for future policy and research.*

**Keywords:** *story-telling; HE–employer links; student perceptions; work-based learning; UK government policy*

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The rationale for carrying out the research study discussed in this paper was the desire to address gaps in the literature on work-based learning (WBL) and, particularly, critical accounts of practice in WBL programmes from the perspectives of students and employers; and the increased priority assigned by government to forging links between industry and higher education. In this latter context, the strengthening links between universities and industry relate to various key factors. First, universities educate many of the employees of UK firms (their human capital, particularly important in the contemporary, globalized knowledge economy). Second, the outputs of university research – whether managerial best practice or inventions that could be commercialized (as innovations) by the private sector – are of critical importance to businesses. And, third, and relating to the previous point, university–industry linkages have been identified as being critical for improving economic

performance. The latter two points are exemplified by government policy to encourage university–industry collaborations, such as the Lambert Review (Lambert, 2003), itself part of the Innovation White Paper (Department of Trade and Industry, 2003) which is based on the assumption that increasing innovations, through university–business linkages (for example, spin-outs and knowledge transfer) can improve economic performance measured by metrics such as competitiveness (Porters and Ketels, 2003).

‘Overall, the UK has a strong science base, but lags in patenting and commercialization. Also, the UK’s strength in the life sciences masks lower performance in other areas of science and technology. Current levels of UK innovation are insufficient to drive UK productivity growth and close the UK productivity gap versus key competitors.’ (Porters and Ketels, 2003)

The policies on university–industry collaboration of the incoming Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010 have not, at the time of writing, been fully articulated. However, a report by the innovative manufacturer Sir James Dyson and published by the Conservative Party includes a number of recommendations, such as increasing the number of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) graduates and making universities more responsive to the needs of businesses (Dyson, 2010). To date [December 2010] the coalition has stated that it will ‘consider’ Dyson’s recommendations (HM Government, 2010). However, on the basis of existing evidence that university–industry collaboration improves economic performance and competitiveness and, therefore, measures such as patent applications, such linkages would be a key component of any export-led growth strategy. The 2010 UK Budget is based on the awareness and belief that the UK has lost some of its competitiveness in global markets and ‘has become more dependent on growth in the public sector’: the coalition proposes to replace this reliance on growth in public sector spending with significantly increased export sales, whilst reducing in real terms public subsidies to universities (HM Treasury, 2010).

Given the roles universities play in economic growth and education, and recognizing that businesses can be an important revenue stream for universities with budgets suffering severe financial pressures, the issue of the disconnect between what business schools do and what employers need (Ghobadian, 2010) could perhaps be addressed by more effective university–employer linkages through WBL. Ghobadian’s (2010) arguments are worth reviewing in some detail because he describes a burgeoning academia–praxis ‘gulf’. In particular, he considers the ‘gap between the values and ideologies of researchers and users’ in terms of ‘applicability’ for managers and ‘logical precision and empirical validity’ for academics. While positivist epistemology has been critiqued in many places (see, for example, Rubin and Rubin, 2005), it is clearly an important methodology for many aspects of management research. However, there are some criticisms in terms of ‘relevance’, ‘communication’ and ‘research methods’, notably: ‘qualitative research is closer to the method most managers use to acquire knowledge and is therefore more likely to be adopted’ (Ghobadian, 2010).

Clearly, WBL programmes are a good example of how universities are trying to meet employers’ needs (either with regard to having more employable graduates with higher levels of human capital or research which is more responsive to managerial practice) and this paper provides a critical account of these practices.

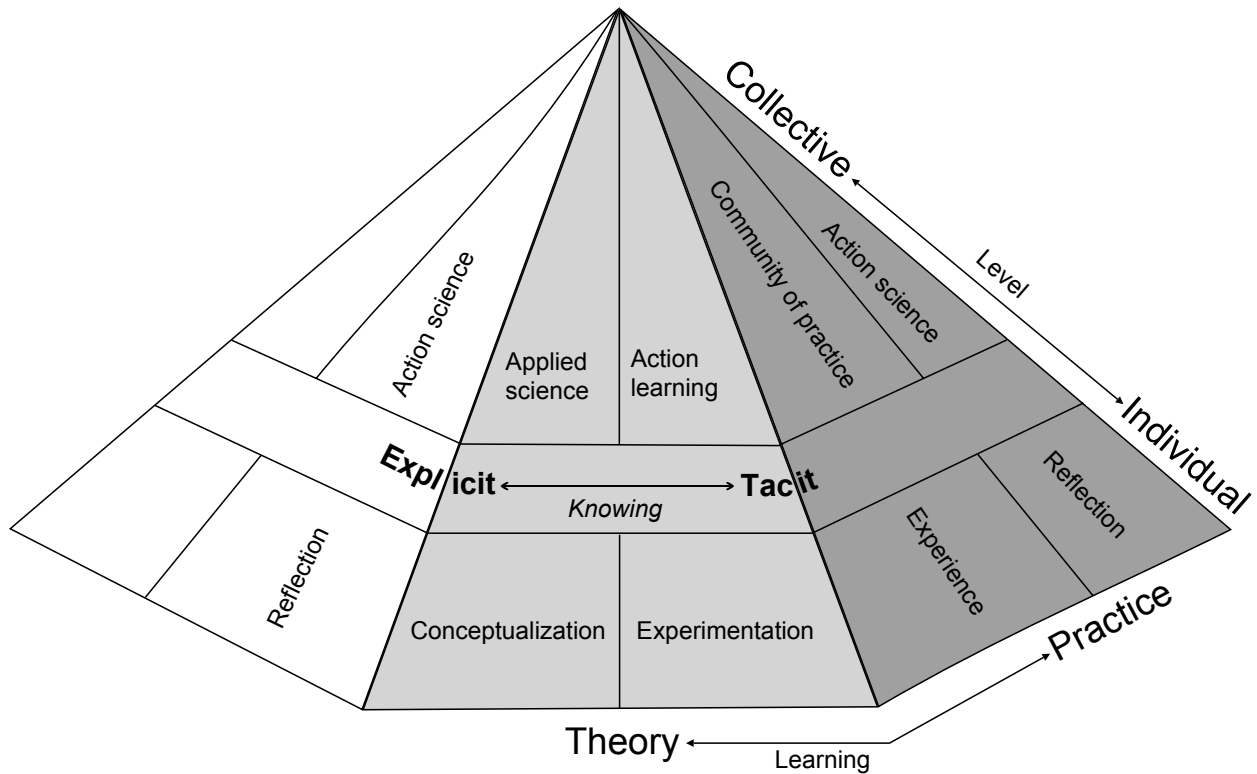
The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section examines definitions of work-based learning and theoretical perspectives on organizational story-telling. This is followed by a methodological account of how the study was conducted, a justification of its approach and recognition that it has several limitations. The next section documents and analyses the stories of key informants. The paper ends with conclusions and a discussion of the implications for practice and further research.

## **Work-based learning**

Boud and Solomon (2001) define the term WBL as ‘being used to describe a class of university programmes that bring together universities and work organizations to create new learning opportunities in workplaces’. They go on to define WBL programmes as sharing the following six characteristics: a partnership between an external organization and an educational institution is specifically established to foster learning; learners involved are employees of, or are in some contractual relationship with, an external organization; the programme is based on the needs of the workplace and the learner rather than being controlled by the disciplinary curriculum, because work is the curriculum; the start of the programme and educational level is established after learners have engaged in a process of recognition of competencies and identification of learning needs rather than relying on educational qualifications; a major element of WBL is that learning projects are undertaken in the workplace; and, finally, the educational institution assesses the learning outcomes of the negotiated programmes with reference to a framework of standards and levels which are transdisciplinary. In other words, with ‘WBL degrees, work is quite literally the foundation of the curriculum . . . the activity from which learning arises and by which learning is defined’ (Boud and Symes, 2000).

Indeed, as Raelin (1999) suggested: ‘Theory makes sense only through practice, but practice makes sense only through reflection as enhanced by theory’. Raelin’s (1997) model, illustrated in Figure 1, is perhaps one of the most powerful and insightful contributions to date to our understanding of WBL. He conceptualizes work-based learning as more than just experiential learning, considering it to be about theory and practice, not just experience.

WBL creates real challenges for higher education institutions because it offers an alternative vision to the traditional approaches to teaching and learning in universities, as Boud and Solomon (2001) point out.



**Figure 1.** Raelin's comprehensive model of work-based learning.

Source: Raelin (1997).

‘Work-based Learning as a pedagogical site challenges most of our conventional assumptions about teaching, learning, knowledge and curriculum. It is a disturbing practice – one that disturbs our understandings about our academic identity and its location. Work-based learning in higher education institutions disturbs most of the conventional binaries that have framed our academic work, including: organizational learning and university learning; performance outcomes and learning outcomes; organizational discourses and academic discourses; theory and practice; and disciplinary knowledge and workplace knowledge.’

The present research focuses on one particular form of WBL, which places the workplace at the centre of the individual's programme of study. The WBL programmes referred to in the study are bespoke partnership programmes negotiated between the university, employer and student.

### Organizational story-telling

Stories of individual and group experience, narratives of corporate culture, ‘authentic’ and ‘unheard’ accounts of change all form an important part of the

dynamics of organizations. Typically it is the narratives of the ‘powerful’ that are captured in documented histories and public accounts. However, the hidden stories and the competing narratives of the ‘less powerful’ also require research and analysis (Dawson, 2003). Organizational story-telling forms an important part of organizational culture and individuals gain meaning from their membership of organizations, relying on it for a set of idealized images that help to form their ego-ideals (Gabriel, 1999). Organizational stories are a good example of a narrative that helps to sustain organizational culture: stories are a symbolic elaboration of facts that place the emphasis on aspects to gain maximum effect and, according to Gabriel (1999), are valuable in understanding the truth.

‘As avenues to the truth, stories are of questionable value. As signs of what people believe to be true and what they want to be true, stories are absolutely invaluable. Instead of offering us “facts as information”, stories offer us “facts as experience”, merging wish-fulfilling fantasies with reality. Hence, the truth of stories is not to be found in the events which they describe but in the meanings which they contain.’

For Gabriel (1999) the activity of story-telling is about creating and sustaining meaning as well as providing a vehicle to discredit other worldviews. He distinguishes between different types of stories such as those that restructure story lines to engage the audience and narratives that provide a chronology of events. Dawson (2003) points out that the political dimension to story-telling must not be ignored as individuals and groups construct stories to influence decision making and the change process.

‘It is not appropriate to reject the importance of stories that are politically motivated, or to ignore the experience of particular individuals or groups. These stories will be partisan and partial, open to flux and change, and may well attempt to get their version of events publicly accepted as the organizational (“authentic”) story of change.’

Story-telling has been comprehensively researched by Gabriel in a number of papers, including his seminal (1995) article on the ‘unmanaged organization’<sup>1</sup> in which he used story-telling as a qualitative research method. Other articles by Gabriel have included guides to and summaries of the technique (Gabriel, 1999, 2004, 2009; Brown *et al*, 2009; Gabriel and Griffiths, 2004). For example, in Gabriel (1991) he uses hermeneutics<sup>2</sup> to explore various types of myths in organizations, described as ‘symbolic means of turning passivity into activity, powerlessness into control, and of offering consolations against pain and suffering’ (*ibid*).

Other scholars have described story-telling as a means of sense-making: more specifically, ‘the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders’, which has its origins in the work of sociologists such as Harvey Sacks (Boje, 1991). While Sacks (1972) applied story-telling to sociological enquiry, its more recent application to organizations is a powerful means of deriving meaning and of making sense of what people say. Boje (1995) later described the Walt Disney Company as ‘a story-telling organization par excellence’, which has various discourses that are considered to be ‘competing’. Hence, this paper adopts Boje’s (1993) conceptualization of an organization,

‘... as a collective story-telling system in which precedent and future-directed stories are shared, revised and interpreted to account for and to affect unfolding organizational changes.’

Another view is that we can understand organizational culture from the story-telling that occurs in them (Boyce, 1996). There are also organizational performance

imperatives for story-telling being positively promoted in an organization. The ‘narrative’ of story-telling has also been identified as having applications that are strategically beneficial (Adamson *et al*, 2006; Denning, 2006), to management development (Morgan and Dennehy, 1997), organizational commitment (McCarthy, 2008), communication (Kaye, 1995) and leadership (Forster *et al*, 1999; Ready, 2002) or even in terms of the effects on reputations of a positive story being told (Vendelø, 1998), potentially improving the performance of staff and, therefore, the organization.

It has been stated, succinctly and highly appropriately, that story-telling ‘makes sense’ (James and Minnis, 2004). Whilst story-telling has been used to explore organizational culture, sense-making and change, it has also been acknowledged as a means by which one can explore continuity, rather than change, that occurs in many organizations (Kolb, 2002, 2003). Given the ‘gulf’ between academia and praxis (Ghobadian, 2010), genuine understanding of change and/or continuity, using organizational story-telling as the ‘lens’ and means of analysis, would be most insightful.

This paper attempts to unlock some of the ‘hidden’ voices of employers and students in WBL programmes. Their stories need to be told in order to identify the problems of establishing WBL programmes: as Dawson (2003) argues, ‘It is the organizational stories of the less powerful that also need to be explained, for they often remain unheard or absent in studies of organizational change.’

## Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used for the research study, with a focus on the perceptions of students and employers involved in the WBL programmes chosen for the investigation; and a case study research strategy was adopted with a variety of data being explored through qualitative interviewing and by analysing appropriate university documents such as minutes of academic meetings, strategies, plans and WBL programme documents. The research was multiple-case, involving WBL programmes at three universities in different geographic regions of England. In terms of research design, all three institutions were analysed together to identify themes from the research in order to address the research question: how do employers and academics perceive the WBL approach in English higher education? At each of the universities, identified here as ‘Northern’, ‘Central’ and ‘Southern’ Universities, those interviewed were one employer representative from each of the three universities and two students who were completing or had recently completed a postgraduate WBL programme. Based on our understanding of the

literature, we conducted discursive story-telling analysis and drew inductive conclusions from the data, to achieve the aim of providing a critical account of practice in WBL programmes in English universities.

There is no single, predominant method of using stories in social research (Gabriel and Griffiths, 2004) and in this case the research agenda being pursued in relation to story-telling was the exploration of stories as a mechanism for organizational learning and communication (Wilkins, 1983; Boje, 1991). The formulations underpinning the research were based on a desire to unlock some of the 'hidden' voices of academics and students in WBL programmes whose accounts are rarely published in the public domain. We believe that their stories need to be told, in order to identify the critical issues in establishing and developing WBL programmes in English universities. Qualitative interviewing was selected because it is a flexible method that can be used in most situations and can produce data of great depth. In terms of whether the research topic is appropriate for qualitative research, the definition by Rubin and Rubin (1995) sums up the appropriateness of this approach.

'Qualitative interviewing is appropriate when the purpose of the research is to unravel complicated relationships and slowly evolving events. It is also suitable when you want to learn how present situations resulted from past decisions or incidents. . . . Qualitative interviewing is warranted whenever depth of understanding is required. It is also the way to explore the broader implications of a problem and place it in its historical, political, or social context.'

King (1994) argues that the qualitative research interview is an appropriate interview method when the 'study focuses on the meaning of a particular phenomenon to the participants . . . where individual historical accounts are required of how a particular phenomenon developed'.

The interviews conducted in the study contained questions which were open and facilitated free-flowing conversations, giving participants scope to tell their stories and provide rich data. Data analysis was based on the formulations underpinning the research, the interview questions and the data collection plan arising from these formulations: this enabled attention to be focused on certain selected data and other, unwanted data to be ignored.

Data matrices were used to present the qualitative data in a manner that made the complex data more comprehensible by reducing it to its component parts, as detailed in the work of Miles and Huberman (1994). These component parts were originally derived from a

detailed 20,000-word account based on analysis of the transcripts on a case-by-case basis identifying initial themes closely related to the research questions. The coding process involved clustering data in relation to each part of the interview questions in the matrices and placing the clusters in sub-categories which reflected the emerging key themes: the insight gained from stepping back and looking at the matrices as a whole enabled the development of the sub-categories. This approach also helped in identifying linkages between seemingly unrelated component parts, further highlighting salient issues. The qualitative method used has strong foundations in organizational studies. A case study is classically defined as:

' . . . an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident.' (Yin, 2003).

While a single case is a perfectly valid means by which in-depth grounded research can be conducted, at least two cases are preferable to one, to improve analysis, insight, comparison and 'replication' (Yin, 2003): this study uses multiple cases. Whilst there are issues of translation from the specific to the general with such research, it is also possible to theorise based on stories from individual organizations. This is because we are not endeavouring to produce statistically significant, representative, weighted survey-type evidence: on the contrary, our aim is to provide in-depth explanations of the stories that occur in organizations. The limitations of such an approach can be overcome by discursive analyses of language through story-telling. Story-telling is another form of analysing language: not individual phrases but complex, linked stories. Discourse analysis is a particular form of qualitative methodology that has strong academic credentials and is well established (see, for example, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Brown and Yule, 1983; Gee 1999; Grant *et al*, 2001; Thomas, 2003; Wetherell *et al*, 2001) and can be used, for instance, in understanding change in organizations (Grant *et al*, 2005). However, discourse analysis must also be considered critically, given its 'ontological, epistemological and theoretical weaknesses' (Reed, 2000). Analysing the findings in this way helps in gaining in-depth insights into the experiences of the participants.

## The case study universities

### *Northern University*

Northern University is a post-1992 institution with a history of involvement in widening-access initiatives.

The WBL programmes at the university are translated into learning across the university using the ‘negotiated learning framework’, an accredited framework which allows individuals to study a tailored programme drawing on core modules from the university’s Lifelong Learning Centre and then from across the university and in-company programmes. The framework was put in place by the university in order to meet the requirements of the widening participation agenda, which has proved successful in terms of recruitment because student numbers have increased.

The students on the WBL programmes typically enter the university on the basis of their work experience rather than more traditional academic qualifications such as A-levels. The research concentrated primarily on postgraduate WBL programmes in the university’s business school which had previously been involved with a number of programmes with a strong WBL element – such as a Masters in Management Practice (MMP), a Certificate in Management and a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at Level 4/5 in management. The MMP is representative of the WBL programme which had been offered in the past and, with the MBA (Public Management) programme which superseded it, is the focus of the present research. Typically, students registering for the WBL programmes are supervisors and middle managers with existing qualifications ranging from management certificates to other professional programmes of study rather than a first degree. Many of the participants have several years’ worth of management experience and use the accreditation of prior and experiential learning (APEL) process to help them enter directly onto a later stage of the programme.

Interviews with a local authority employer linked to the programmes at Northern University involved a representative having a key role in the establishment of the WBL programmes – in this case, the training manager. The other interviewees were students who had completed the certificate in management and MMP, both of which consisted predominantly of WBL modules; and an accountant based in the housing department and a principal officer based in the democratic services department.

#### *Central University*

Central University is a post-1992 university specializing in WBL programmes that focus on the creativity and reflexivity of individuals in a work-based context. The WBL programmes offered, in the school of lifelong learning and education, are developed through negotiation with the employer and the university, resulting in an individual learning agreement containing the proposed study plan. A review of previous certified

learning is carried out with students when they commence and this is developed into an agreed personal and professional development plan. Students are required to design a proposal for a real-life, work-based project to be implemented in the workplace.

In terms of the type of WBL programmes offered, these range from undergraduate qualifications such as Bachelor of Arts (BA), through to postgraduate including postgraduate diploma (PGDip), Master of Arts (MA), and the Doctorate in Professional Studies (DProf). All programmes on offer have a high degree of flexibility, enabling individuals to design their own as appropriate.

Students entering the WBL programmes come from the public and voluntary sectors or are self-employed. The programmes are run for individual students and individual employers as part of staff development initiatives, with many students entering the programme not arriving by way of traditional routes. The corporate programme operates on the basis of a three-way agreement between the university, the employer and the student. Employers can also vary the programme, to meet their needs. The programme studied in the present research was the MA in WBL at a UK police force with the majority of students being middle managers at Inspector level or above: most had previously studied for academic qualifications such as a management certificate or first degree and had relevant prior learning. The interviews were conducted with the training manager, who helped to negotiate and implement the programme, and two students from the personnel and training departments.

#### *Southern University*

Southern University is a post-1992 university and the research was based in the business school with particular interest in the MSc WBL programme. The business school has a fast-track Flexible Masters Programme based on an employee learning contract, a written agreement between the employee, the university and the company mentor, which sets out the programme plan.

The Associate Dean for curriculum has articulated a strategy which places WBL in the context of widening participation and flexibility, achieved with the development of Foundation degrees and learning through different mechanisms – for example, WBL in conjunction with web-based programmes.

Private sector employer representation in a partnership programme with Southern University is with the commercial department of a multi-national company responsible for systems integration. The company has contracts with a range of public and private sector organizations such as London Underground and the

National Health Service (NHS). The MSc is aimed at junior and middle managers in the company and the entry requirements are a relevant academic qualification, such as a first degree, or a minimum of five years' professional experience in a relevant discipline. The assessment process is based on an individual learning contract, which the individual needs to agree and meet through a variety of tailored assessments, as the commercial manager explains:

'... we have something called a learning contract, which is basically an agreement between the individual and the university on how they are going to achieve the learning outcomes ... so long as you can demonstrate that the learning outcomes can be achieved you can approach it in any particular way.'

In terms of ownership of the programme, the company owns the programme for three years after which period it reverts to the university which can then develop it as it wishes.

Those interviewed were the commercial manager and two students, the project manager and contracts manager, both based in the commercial department and both studying for the MSc in WBL which was based mostly in the workplace.

## Findings and discussion

The findings are divided into the four main themes which emerged from the research: issues of learning support; organizational issues; links between the WBL programme and the workplace; and barriers to change.

### *Issues of learning support*

Students at all the universities raised a number of issues concerning learning support, categorized as lack of in-depth preparation prior to the course; a heavy dependence on the line manager to grant time to complete their courses; the variable quality of learning materials; a lack of clarity at the outset about intended aims and outcomes; no benchmark being available for the first piece of work; and a reliance on students to develop the skills necessary to survive the course. The following verbatim quotes illustrate the range of problems encountered.

'The actual induction course could have done with being a bit longer to actually make people more fully aware of how deep we were going to be involved. We were told at the time that we were only going to have one day a month on the actual course ... the time we had to put in at home was quite demanding really, very time consuming, you seemed to lose a

life or a year while we were doing it.' (student, housing department, attending Northern University.)

'... more time at the university ... even if it's just being in an academic environment sitting in the library for the last half day having access to the books.' (student, democratic services department, attending Northern University.)

'Can I put it quite bluntly, the learning materials ... are crap. Grammatically awful and there are spelling mistakes throughout, it is self-contradictory and there are bits that are missing.' (student, personnel department, attending Central University.)

'Well it is motivation to keep going and I don't think there is a lot of direction from the university to keep the motivation up. Again, the content of this particular programme is a weakness because it doesn't give you enough ledges to hold on to.' (student, training department, attending Central University.)

'I am currently doing my first module, reading a book and putting in data but I have no real benchmark to understand what they are expecting ... I mean if you go back to your old school days when you did O-levels you always got to look at past papers so I guess if there is a weakness then it is understanding I am going down the right path.' (student, project management, attending Southern University.)

One of the students at Southern University felt that there was a wider issue to be addressed about how the university related to the employer and students. He argued they had only had one similar course with another company.

'It [the university] knows what it wants in principal but it doesn't know how to do it, it doesn't really know what we want ... how to respond to the feedback ... and it doesn't really know how to engage with this so I think they are really struggling to deliver and deliver to its full potential.' (student, contracts management, attending Southern University.)

The issues highlighted are indicative of problems found on a range of academic programmes. However, the innovative nature of some of them means that these programmes are under constant scrutiny and need to be as problem-free as possible if they are to be viewed positively.

At Central University, the learning support and materials were deemed poor, despite repeated complaints about their quality, and perhaps exemplify



the problems faced by a development at the leading edge of change in English universities. These issues need to be addressed if this type of programme is to gain any credibility amongst British academics.

The principal officer attending the programmes at Northern University suggested that some of the critical issues related to the need to rely on a student's manager being prepared to allow time 'to do the course justice' and having to reapply for this time to be available each year.

'I think the weak elements if I look at them . . . first it relies a lot on your manager back at work to allow you the time to do the course justice. I know that there were other people on the course who maybe didn't have a supportive manager and who really struggled in getting the hours in. . . . I had to reapply every year [and] although I did get through there was that additional worry each time well what happens if my application is knocked back.' (student, democratic services department, attending Northern University.)

At the start of the certificate programme there were specific problems with delays incurred in the return of students' initial assignments from the academic staff. This created difficulties because students did not know how they had performed and they had to hand in further work before receiving feedback; and it was compounded by the fact that a number of the students had not been in an academic environment for many years. The accountant on the programme at Northern University felt that attendance of one day a month at the university was not sufficient; but she also stated that the quality of the teaching was excellent and liked the fact that the senior management of the business school operated an 'open-door' policy so that students could readily seek advice and guidance without necessarily having to arrange a time for a formal meeting. She noted that the move to a single campus [which took place during her attendance on the programme] made it feel very positive.

'Walking through the front door at the new site and the amount of computers that was just overwhelming and very positive as you know that people were there that we could approach.'

The principal officer in the democratic services department also felt that the quality of the teaching was good.

'I think the main strengths are the quality of the teaching, the fact that these people had a day and a half to inspire as well as sort of get through a whole raft of academic underpinning knowledge.'

She also felt that the work-based approach gave the programme a real edge, but that in many ways this imposed an extra burden because of the need to contextualize the learning in terms of the workplace requirements. Asked about problems in the programme and how these were addressed, she suggested that these were related to the organization and administration of the programme. Issues raised included the need for quicker turnaround for marking assignments and missing assignments: a meeting was held with the Dean of the business school, after which action was taken to deal with these problems. In addition, a problem arose when a lecturer, who had clear ideas about what was required in the assignments, was absent on long-term sick-leave and was replaced with someone who had very different ideas on how assignments should be written. The main problem for the accountant, however, concerned her relationship with one particular lecturer and this was dealt with through the intervention of senior management.

'At one stage I mentioned I did have a problem with a certain lecturer and I did feel as though it got to be a personal vendetta against me . . . that was when the Dean got involved, sat down talked it through with him and he actually then read what I had previously done and he couldn't find a problem so it was addressed at the highest level . . . it helped build my confidence because to be truthful my spelling and things like that aren't my strongest point. . . . I was told that that really wasn't what I should have been criticized for and that helped me.'

Both interviewees were asked if they would recommend the programmes they had completed to colleagues. The accountant said she would and the two women she spoke to have since gone on to complete it. The principal officer in the democratic services department also recommended the programme, but with certain caveats.

'Well, they would have to know what they were getting into and know that they can get so much out but they need to put a lot into it. If they are not prepared to put that effort in then it is going to be a hard slog from beginning to end and you would question why they are doing it. I watched too many people fall by the wayside and on the certificate course I think there were three people that didn't finish it and two colleagues ended up on long term sick with stress.'

The next development for the principal officer was that she felt she would be using the tools she had learned

and had developed networks with people on the programme.

‘Yes there have been friendships formed and yes networking there so I now know somebody else and . . . I am getting e-mails to me saying can you remember that model and how did we use that.’

The accountant felt that she would build on the skills and knowledge gained and either go into marketing or stay in accountancy practice as lead officer for income in the local authority.

#### *Organizational issues*

The employer representatives raised a number of organizational issues that were related either to the design or content of the WBL programme in the context of their work. An example of this was evident at Central University, where nobody from the organization except those in the training department had provided input for the partnership programme and, as a result, projects relevant to the whole organization were not being used.

‘What we have discovered as we have gone through the last few years is that nobody actually from across the organization has an input in to the relationship from the partnership only the training department does but if you think about it the course that we do then the whole thing is about . . . future policy and some of the projects will be on recruitment, retention, policy and stuff like that.’ (training manager with employer linked to Central University.)

This problem has recently been solved with a new partnership agreement proposing wider representation in the steering group, to include individuals from across the organization and thus increase the level of shared knowledge. Another example of problems that arose was at Southern University where there were issues concerning the recruitment process: both students had felt compelled to start the course, claiming it was virtually mandatory and, as one stated, ‘it was volunteers with an arm up your back’. This view contrasted with that of the commercial manager who claimed that the selection process was based on volunteers. One of the students at Southern University identified a dilemma concerning the design of the programme, with regard to identifying whose objectives were being met:

‘. . . you have almost got a tautology because the course booklet outlines the objectives . . . and the kind of knowledge skill set of objectives for each

module which is principally derived from the company contribution to the course. When people structure their projects it is meant to meet those objectives so the individual delegate will meet what the company originally identified. Now you then have two questions: does that really reflect what the company wants and if it is will the company get what it wants, and secondly does that reflect what the university believes would be sound learning objectives for that kind of module. This depends on how comfortable the university was in devising the curriculum and the course content with the company.’

The other important issue raised by students at Central and Southern Universities was the credibility of the course – because it was workplace-focused and was not based on an independent body of knowledge which would be found in other discipline-based courses in other subject areas. The following quotes illustrate the problems.

‘I feel as though I haven’t got the complete learning compared to if I had done maybe something at another university. . . . In my own mind I don’t know whether I have got the credibility to say that I have got a masters degree in something.’ (student, training department, attending Central University.)

‘Learning is so integral to the work the value cannot be as powerful as if it were an independent course . . . that would have a total body of knowledge.’ (student, contract management, attending Southern University.)

This challenges the core principles underpinning WBL programmes. It is a problem that academics in this field have to face and to which they must respond. Fulton *et al* (1996) argue that ‘professional learning’ needs to be differentiated from learning which is simply occupationally relevant. This is an important epistemological point that lies at the heart of the debate on the value of WBL because it highlights the wider social context of learning and definitions of ‘learned’. WBL may improve employee performance at work, but does it help the learner to be able to shape and contribute to the wider debates and movements, in both theory and practice, in their own professions? These wider contexts are important in gaining a critical understanding and moving from what Barnett (1997) describes as ‘being able to act in the world with understanding to mere operationalism’. This is particularly relevant in knowledge-based disciplines where up-to-date knowledge and understanding is essential for professional credibility.

### *Linking WBL programmes and the workplace*

Students and employers identified a number of links between the WBL programmes and the workplace. For instance, at Northern University the students interviewed had benefited in practical terms through using knowledge from modules such as business planning and had developed their confidence in speaking to audiences and dealing with senior management. The programme helped students to apply academic theories to practice and developed their intellectual and analytical abilities, as the following quote illustrates.

‘It opened up a new range of theoretical models that I didn’t know existed before like value chain analysis and performance management systems. . . . I feel I have got the tools available to me and the biggest thing is the strategic element as I have to write a lot of strategic documents and it has given me a good foundation in terms of the frameworks I had analysed.’ (student, democratic services, attending Northern University.)

At Central University, the students felt that the programme had raised their awareness of strategic issues and given them a better overview of the organization. The programme also developed their skills and ability to carry out research and planning, and in time management. For the employer at Southern University, some of the major benefits were the flexibility of the programme, the opportunity to recognize past experience and links to the job. The students at Southern University felt it had encouraged them to ‘stand back and look at the wider picture’. A further identified benefit of the programme was the fact that it involved work-based study and, according to the project manager at Southern University, ‘. . . on that basis you can very much rely on what you actually do in a workplace to get you through it’. Another advantage is that the programme can reflect what the employer wants, so it has a real business focus; it is convenient because people do not have to go off-site to attend and it can be integrated with their day-to-day work.

From an organizational perspective, the WBL programmes were regarded as having a number of benefits: greater flexibility, with students studying at their own pace and level; ability to be adapted to meet the needs of the employer; helping recruitment; and research findings transmitted back into the organization, as the following quotes illustrate.

‘The programme is relevant to the workplace and some students have been promoted. The studying of

the qualification has been clearly recognized internally – the CEO is closely involved.’ (training manager with employer linked to Northern University.)

‘There are not many MA programmes that you can go on where it costs nothing and you can do it in work time which is another big bonus . . . we have actually had people coming for a job to do the MA as this was one of the major attractions.’ (training manager with employer linked to Central University.)

The employers and students identified a range of benefits of WBL programmes for both the individual and employer. These included, for example, mutually agreed work-based projects, organizational research into a critical area for the organization and developing the analytical skills of the employee. Whilst these benefits can sometimes be difficult to identify, they are important because they represent the added value that such programmes can offer.

### *Barriers to change*

A number of barriers to change were identified: intensity of block delivery and problems in terms of preparation and attendance; lack of face to face contact; and problems of consistency in the quality of programme delivered.

An example of a barrier arose at Northern University, where the knowledge input is delivered at the university over a two-day period: this is very intensive and can cause problems. Restricting teaching to two days helps students to manage their workload whilst in employment, but the large quantity of material to be covered in this short space of time can be excessive for some students. Another barrier occurred at Northern and Central Universities, where students felt that there was a lack of face-to-face contact on the WBL programme and that problems and issues could have been resolved more easily if there had been more tutorials rather than a reliance on e-mail communications, as the following quotes illustrate.

‘I think it would have helped to have a bit more contact with the tutor so even a day and a half would have helped just that bit more. It would also have helped with assignments. . . . I know the tutors were there to be e-mailed and at the other end of the telephone but I also think if we had been in class and we had all spoke about it at the same time it would have helped the other people in the class as well.’ (student, housing department, attending Northern University.)

‘I think being work-based you do lose a little bit of contact and face to face with the tutor although they are good and give you the opportunity to have a tutorial when they do visit I think that does get a little bit lost. I would have liked more tutorials.’ (student, training department, attending Central University.)

The roots of many of these problems are linked to the organizational culture in higher education, in which many of the values and practices can be firmly entrenched and difficult to overcome. Many academics are reluctant to change working practices such as block delivery of programmes – because they consider such changes would have a negative impact on their ability to carry out research and would disrupt their working patterns. The process of culture change is difficult and is usually a long term issue: if, however, these types of WBL programmes are to survive and flourish, then change will need to happen.

## Summary and conclusions

This paper has used organizational story-telling as a method for exploring the university–employer relationship through the implementation of WBL programmes. Given the policy context, in terms of the strategies of various UK Governments towards linkages between universities and businesses on a number of different dimensions (see, for example, DfES, 2003; Dearing, 1997; Lambert, 2003; Department of Trade and Industry, 2003; Dyson, 2010; HM Government, 2010) and the growing academia–praxis ‘gulf’ with regards to business schools (Ghobadian, 2010), the findings reported here are of particular relevance. It is argued that the key contribution of this paper to the literature on work-based learning is, therefore, the application of story-telling to explore critical accounts of practice in WBL programmes in English universities. In these concluding remarks we summarize the key findings and propose some recommendations for future policy and research.

The main issues emerging relate to the lack of learning support for students – for example, poor quality learning materials and lack of preparation and support; organizational issues, particularly the lack of credibility of WBL qualifications; the links between the WBL programme and the workplace which helped students put knowledge into practice and helped employers meet their staff development needs; and the barriers to change due to the intensive nature of the learning experience and lack of face-to-face contact. There are benefits for both the employee and employer with regard to bespoke WBL programmes which provide the flexibility and

workplace applicability that both parties need. Nevertheless, the research has also identified issues of quality and lack of support for students on this type of programme and these need to be resolved because innovative programmes of this nature are currently subject to greater and more intense scrutiny than other programmes in universities in England.

Over the last ten years a key part of British government strategy for higher education has been the expansion of work-based degrees, such as the Foundation degree and other WBL programmes, in order to meet the changing patterns of employment and the need to increase the levels of skills in the workforce. Hopefully, the research findings in this paper will inform this particular debate, especially at postgraduate level, on the issues that need to be addressed in relation to the implementation of WBL programmes in higher education. Whilst several benefits of WBL for the participants have been identified, these have mostly been localized in the universities studied: it is the case that these universities have made concerted efforts to introduce and support WBL and it is felt unlikely that the situation elsewhere is any better, in terms of being more widespread.

This suspicion would seem to be well-founded: the CHERI/KPMG Report to HEFCE (HEFCE, 2006) notes that ‘learner in the workplace’ programmes have ‘yet to achieve widespread take-up’. (Although this CHERI/KPMG project concentrated on employers’ views of WBL, and the report often conflates sub-degree, undergraduate and postgraduate programmes in its narrative, its findings are nonetheless indicative in relation to postgraduate programmes to which the Report does explicitly refer.) The research findings in this present paper provide exposure for the voices of students and employers involved in innovative WBL programmes and add to the wider national and international research pictures. The literature on WBL has been growing but, as Gilhooly *et al* (2004) argue, there is still a lack of research on current practice.

‘Work-based learning has been in existence for a considerable time but is relatively new in the university curriculum . . . published research is not extensive but growing and that focus is on the pragmatic arguments . . . there is a real need for research based on current practice to be reported. As long ago as 1996 Brennan and Little reported a range of activity that could be called work-based learning and it is inconceivable that little development has occurred since then.’

Research into practice is crucial if universities and employers are to understand what is successful and

share good practice for future WBL programmes. It is clear that more needs to be done to promote and advance the research agenda on WBL, given its anticipated increasing importance in higher education over the next few years.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>a kind of organizational dream world in which desires, anxieties and emotions find expressions in highly irrational constructions. The chief force in this terrain is fantasy and its landmarks include stories, myths, jokes, gossip, nicknames, graffiti and cartoons. In the organizational dream world, emotions prevail over rationality and pleasure over reality.' (Gabriel, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Hermeneutics is defined as how much individual parts are impacted upon by the whole of which they are constituent parts, and vice versa (Gadamer, 1989).

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