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Citation: Smith, Paul J., Poppitt, Nicola and Scott, Jonathan (2011) Changing the mindset: An innovative work-based learning programme within an English higher education institution. In: 12th International HRD Conference, 25-27 May 2011, University of Gloucestershire.

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Title: Changing the mind set: a case study of an innovative work-based learning programme with English higher education

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Stream: Vocational education, training and workplace learning

Submission type: fully refereed paper

Changing the mindset: an innovative work-based learning programme within an English higher education institution

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore and critically analyse the perceptions and experiences of academics in relation to the design and delivery of an innovative Work Based Learning (WBL) programme within an English higher education institution (HEI). These perceptions were gathered through semi-structured interviews and subjected to discourse analysis. Consequently, the key themes which have emerged are: (i) the intensity of the learning experience, (ii) the tensions and pressures amongst academics delivering the programme, for example an expectation that academics 'get it right first time', and (iii) learning support for students. The paper concludes with recommendations for future policy and research.

1. Introduction

Given that, 'the most effective classroom is often the workplace itself.' (Felstead et al, 2005), the rise of work-based learning (WBL) has manifested itself in a new type of programme which brings unique challenges for both academics and students (Fuller et al, 2004; Gray et al, 2004; Grugulis, 2007; Lee et al, 2004; Rainbird and Munro, 2003; Rainbird et al, 2005), which this paper explores in relation to an innovative WBL programme. This programme is an award winning Foundation degree programme in Leadership and Management developed in partnership between a post-1992 university and a Chamber of Commerce. Therefore, the paper aims to explore and critically analyse the perceptions and experiences of academics in relation to the design and delivery of this programme. The study is particularly apposite, given key gaps in the WBL literature, most notably a dearth of critical accounts of practice within WBL programmes from the perspective of academics. This type of research is also needed given the increased priority by government in relation to forging links between business and higher education (as discussed in the next section).

Following a literature review, a research question was formulated: “What are the perceptions and experiences of academics in terms of programme design/delivery?”. To gather the data which was later subjected to discourse analysis, key academics were interviewed in-depth. The participants were interviewed in an open-ended fashion, and thus encouraged to introduce concerns and themes that were of critical importance to the research topic. Accordingly, the key themes that emerged were analysed and discussed, viz: (i) the intensity of the learning experience in the delivery mode adopted; (ii) tensions among academics in the process of delivering this type of programme, e.g. an expectation that academics ‘get it right first time’; and (iii) the specific academic support for students on this type of programme.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 is a theoretical and contextual section, exploring developments in WBL within higher education and the innovative nature of the Foundation degree programme on which the paper is focused. Section 3 is a detailed methodology; Section 4 the results and discussion; and Section 5 the conclusion and implications for future research and policy.

2. Theory and context

2.1 Developments in WBL in higher education – theory and practice

2.1.1 Theoretical context and antecedents

Organisational learning and the “learning organisation” (e.g. Argyris, 1977; March, 1991; Senge, 1990; Raper et al, 2007) are important theoretical bodies of work to which work-based learning can be related (see, for example, Fiol and Lyles, 1985; Dodgson, 1993; Easterby-Smith, 1997), and it is worth considering specifically the evidence on work-based learning (see also Gray et al, 2004; Grugulis, 2007). A principal argument for work-based learning relates to theories and models of experiential learning (Dewey, 1938; Lewin, 1942; Kolb, 1984), in which people learn through a process of reflection and review. Pedagogy that is more experiential has been demonstrated to improve employability (Nabi and Bagley, 1999); for example, through practical exercises, case studies and problem based learning (Rae, 2004), or through ‘integrated learning’ (Klein, 2005; Eraut, 2007). In particular, some authors have argued that a learning-by-doing,

reflective, and experiential approach is clearly so much more effective in achieving learning outcomes and engagement, in these cases within entrepreneurship courses (Cope and Watts, 2000; Cope, 2005). Indeed, work-based learning has evidently been successful in promoting employability and enterprising behaviours at UK higher education institutions (Moreland, 2005; Little, 2006; Nixon et al, 2006), and the notion of the 'expanded university' (Nicolou-Walker, 2008). In the light of these important findings showing that WBL is relevant to practice, we explore some of the theoretical contributions on this theme.

There has been considerable prior research on workplace learning, for example by (Rainbird, 2000; Felstead et al, 2009), as well as employee involvement in training in the workplace (Felstead et al, 2010), the dichotomy of informal and formal workplace learning (Lee et al, 2004) and on how learning at work can be improved using a systematic approach (Felstead et al, 2009). Work-based learning can be used, for example, in organisational change (Nicolou-Walker, 2007) and also in terms of 'reflective practice' (Nicolou-Walker and Garnett, 2004), which is a key component of this process. Clearly, WBL has been extensively researched (for example, Bennett, 2000; Boud and Simes, 2002; Boud and Solomon, 2001; Cunningham et al., 2004; Raelin, 1997, 1999, 2000). For instance, the "reliability and validity" of assessment and self-assessment in work-based learning has been questioned (Bennett, 1993), whilst there is also a useful handbook of rationale, strategies, tactics and methods of work-based learning (Cunningham et al., 2004). Critically, reflection forms a major part of the theorising behind work-based learning. Indeed, as Raelin (1999: 564) suggested:

"Theory makes sense only through practice, but practice makes sense only through reflection as enhanced by theory".

Hence, due to the theory-practice-reflexion nexus expounded by Raelin (1997, 1999), the work-based learning approach is one method of dealing with some of the major concerns of Ghobadian (2010) relating to the "inapplicability" of management research and this "gap" that is argued to exist between industry and universities. Raelin (1997) conceptualises work-based learning as moving further than experiential learning, in the sense that it is about theory and practice – and not just experience. Raelin distinguishes between collective (organisational) v. individual (employee) learning, practice v. theory,

explicit v. tacit knowledge; and reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation (ibid). Whilst there has clearly been considerable research interest in WBL, the next subsection explores how WBL (and, by implication, various WBL and more general learning models) has been applied in practice, and then extrapolates the key research gap.

2.1.2 Policy and practice of WBL in HEIs

Higher education institutions have been encouraged by successive British governments since the 1990s to develop their business-facing activity (ED, 1992; ED, 1994; DfEE, 1997; DfEE, 1998; NCIHE, 1997), despite concerns about unwillingness of employers to engage in work-based programmes (Reeve and Gallacher, 2005; Smith and Preece, 2009). The Higher Education funding Council (HEFCE) has made employer engagement a key policy in the transformation of the HE sector with 60 employer engagement pilot projects through the Strategic Development Fund totalling £148 million, supporting universities to work with over 50,000 people and 11,000 businesses in the period April 2009 to September 2010 (HEA, 2010). Over the last five years there have been a series of position papers and policy documents which have emphasised the importance of universities working more closely with employers (Universities UK, 2006; King, 2007; DIUS, 2008; The Higher Education Academy 2008a, 2008b; CBI, 2009a, 2009b). The current economic crisis has emphasised the importance of international competitiveness and the reliance on development and application of knowledge and new ideas. Consequently there has been recognition that higher education has a key role to play in improving business performance and improving competitiveness particularly through the application of knowledge gained through research which would appear to have been a key influence on UK Government policy. The policy objective of business playing a greater role in the higher education system is not new, as the need for the British education system to provide skills and qualifications relevant to industry has been a concern of successive governments (Burrage, 1994). The Conservative Governments of the 1980s saw the role of higher education as being to serve the economy more efficiently and develop closer links with industry and commerce along with promoting enterprise. The 1997 Labour Government continued with the main thrust of this policy towards a human capital vision of higher education, which McIntyre and Solomon (2000: 88) argue has become 'a global policy discourse that justifies the restructuring of public education to promote individual choice but requiring individuals to contribute to its costs.'

Mills and Whittaker (2001) argue that government policy since the 1990s has had two strands of supporting arguments rather than a single policy. These strands are, firstly, instrumental in nature and emphasise the role of WBL in economic development and, secondly, the role of WBL as part of the social inclusion and pedagogical progress agendas (ibid). The first strand presents WBL as meeting the needs of employers and industry, i.e. breaking down the barriers between industry and higher education and also addressing the personal and job development needs of individuals. The second strand argues that WBL is a route to wider access to higher education. The increasing emphasis on WBL is contributing to the changing role of the university and its relationship with mainstream educational developments and is responding to changing conceptions of what constitutes valid learning and knowledge. It is also notable that, while WBL policy has had certain desirable effects, it also has had 'unintended consequences', for example in the context of public sector organisations and issues of 'investment in ... training and development' (Rainbird et al, 2005), not to mention issues of labour relations (Rainbird, 2000).

McIntyre and Solomon (2000), in their analysis of the policy environment of WBL, argue that globalisation has been a driving force for the broader policy agenda, highlighting that it is educational policy that has placed WBL firmly on the agenda of higher education institutions. Such policy developments cannot be disentangled from the broader changes happening within higher education and employment and in particular the changing nature of work. McIntyre and Solomon (2000) and Jarvis (2007) have argued that there is a new work order, based around areas such as increased workloads with fewer resources, flexibility, teams and the increase in employees cross-functional knowledge which are connected to local and global economic trends and the development of new technologies. The binary divide between the academy and the workplace has become less visible as higher education has witnessed the joining up of these environments for learning. This has helped a new type of WBL programme emerge within the higher education sector, which is explored in the next section (in general and with specific reference to our case study).

2.2 Development of an intermediate-level qualification

The development of Foundation degrees (FDs) has been a key policy priority within both the Labour governments (1997-2010) as the main work-focused qualification in higher education, and the current Coalition Government. One of the most notable changes in the role of universities today concerns their linkages with industry. Whilst universities conduct research that may lead to commercially-viable innovations and therefore contribute to national economic performance, they also educate many employees of UK firms (Smith and Scott, 2011). Although economic demand has been a principal driver of such linkages, so too has government policy – e.g. the Lambert Review (Lambert, 2003), part of the Innovation White Paper (Department of Trade and Industry, 2003), and the recommendations of Sir James Dyson’s report (Dyson, 2010; HM Government, 2010: 10). This policy agenda also dovetails with the Government’s reduction of public sector spending (including university funding), shifting towards private-sector growth and increased exports, (ibid) – and, most notably, the Browne Review of university funding, the increasing of tuition fees and the move towards a more ‘progressive’ university funding regime. The Rt Hon Dr Vince Cable MP (2010),¹ Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, stated that there would be 10,000 more apprenticeship places and – despite budget cuts – priority would be given to developing the skills of the workforce and vocational training. It could be suggested that more effective university-employer linkages (such as through WBL, despite Reeve and Gallacher’s (2005) and Smith and Preece’s (2009) concerns) might address Ghobadian’s (2010) diagnosis of a burgeoning academia-praxis ‘gulf’, i.e. that Business School academic researchers are not addressing the needs of businesses. 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 (ibid). WBL programmes that are specifically tailored to employers’ needs might well be a viable remedy.

¹ Rt Hon Dr Vince Cable MP (2010), interview on *BBC Newsnight*, Monday 24 May.

FDs were launched in 2001 following advice from the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) that the development of a 'sub-degree' linked to intermediate level occupations was needed (Wilson *et al.*, 2005). FDs were designed to address skills shortages at higher technician/associate professional level (DfES, 2003; Doyle, 2003); provide a progression route to honours degrees (DfEE, 2000); and meet the widening participation agenda by attracting students from under-represented groups (HEFCE, 2000; DfES, 2003; Dodgson and Whitham, 2005).

The drivers for FDs can be located within a global context of increased competition and a need for a higher level of skills. Robertson (2002) investigated intermediate level qualifications in other countries and found two main policy drivers for widening participation: by volume and social composition and employer pressure for a suitably qualified workforce. He concluded that intermediate level qualifications in America, France and Germany generally contain the following aspects: 'a work placement, or some kind of work experience; have been designed under conditions of local autonomy in order to respond to local labour markets; recruit well where they do meet local employment needs; are trusted by employers because of this; may act as a 'bridge' between learning and earning (especially in America); and allow students to reposition themselves in jobs markets acting as a cost-efficient and high quality substitute for "on-job" experience' (Robertson, 2002: 65). It is perhaps appropriate that, 'the notion of apprenticeship' has been 'extend[ed] ... to develop and explore different contexts for learning to challenge prevailing orthodoxies on the nature of learning' (Ainley and Rainbird, 1999), given contemporary discourse in the UK about a lost generation of 1,000,000 young people (aged 18-24) not in employment, education or training (Local Government Association and Centre for Social Justice, 2009). As well as understanding the 'social context' behind workplace learning and training (Fuller *et al.*, 2004), this extension of apprenticeships as a concept, theoretically, could include non-vocational, university-level qualifications delivered in the workplace, such as Foundation degrees.

Wilson *et al.*, (2005: 2) point out that when the Foundation degree was launched David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment, (DfEE, 2000) 'provided a number of economic, educational and social arguments which were the underlying drivers for FDs:

1. The National Skills Task Force (DfEE, 1999) identification of a need to increase the number of highly skilled technicians and associated professions particularly financial services, the health professions, culture and IT, media and sport, and tourism and leisure.
2. FDs would contribute to the lifelong learning and widening participation agendas by attracting people from under-represented groups.
3. FDs would also offer progression for those people possessing vocational A-levels or Advanced Modern Apprenticeships.
4. FDs would provide flexible modes of delivery including distance learning and part-time study which would allow students to “earn and learn”.

Wilson *et al.*, (2005: 8) conclude that there ‘is some progression towards these objectives’ and that the FD will ‘evolve as practitioners and curriculum theorists learn more from the FD experience and as successive Governments support complementary initiatives in vocational learning.’ FDs are clearly a growing area of importance for British higher education and will help to raise skill levels and widen access to students who would not traditionally enter higher education. Despite their importance, there has been relatively little research into their implementation (Tierney and Slack, 2005) until recently with Wilson *et al.*, (2005) examining FDs at Bradford University and Greenbank (2007) at Edge Hill University.

The drive for a two-year sub-degree qualification negotiated and designed in conjunction with employers from the sector comes from an anticipated and real skill shortage at the associate professional and higher technician levels. One of the main problems, which have been highlighted by the previous Labour government, is the prejudice with which vocational qualifications are viewed by employers:

Work-focused higher education courses focused on this skill level have suffered from social and cultural prejudice against vocational education. Employers claim that they want graduates whose skills are better fitted for work; but the labour market premium they pay still favours three-year honours degrees (DfES, 2003: 61).

The government has provided financial incentives for universities and colleges to develop vocational programmes such as Foundation degrees and hope that these will act as stimuli in order to break traditional patterns of demand.

2.3. The Foundation degree programme

The programme which is the focus of the paper is a Foundation degree in Leadership and Management approved in December 2006 with five cohorts recruited in the first two calendar years and a total of nine cohorts to date scheduled to run until January 2012. The programme has been very successful to date recruiting well and was winner of a national award for outstanding employer engagement in 2009. The programme was designed so that each of the twelve modules would be delivered over an eight-week teaching block and it adopts a blended learning approach of master class delivery and use of the Virtual Learning Environment [VLE]. Each master class consists of a two day workshop delivered by experienced academics and/or senior practitioners who have substantial experience of the academic discipline through teaching, research or consultancy. The curriculum is predominantly derived from the context of application of the learning [i.e. the workplace] as well as the students' current knowledge and experience. The pedagogy is also experiential in nature, centred on the application of learning in the workplace and evidence-based assessment of progress and achievement. This ensures that the workplace – the primary site of learning – provides an opportunity for the practical application of knowledge and skills through action or problem-based projects. The target market for the programme is current/aspirant supervisors and managers seeking to customize learning and give immediate added value to their organization. It has the following special features:

- The use of commercial profiling tools to support personal development
- Flexible, sequential delivery and step on/step off capability
- Induction is closely linked to the first module which is delivered by the programme leader in order to embed the culture and approach of the programme
- Reflection and personal development planning are key features of the programme and delegates are encouraged to record and reflect on critical incidents of their learning experiences and work experiences that relate to the programme

- The residential element of the programme helps with retention and building confidence as it is the second module and gives the delegates the opportunity to develop personal relationships and networks
- There is a high level of employer commitment and involvement in the development and direction of the programme.

University A is a post-1992 university with nearly 28,000 students 60% of whom are part-time. It offers a range of vocational and academic programmes and has developed a reputation as one of the leading universities for employer engagement. The Chamber of commerce is based in the North of England and champions, connects and develops member businesses, and their people, to win more business, become better businesses and enjoy better conditions for business within the region it serves and around the world.

3. Methodology

The research employed a qualitative research design in which seven face-to-face in-depth interviews were carried out with key individuals involved with the Foundation degree. The research focused on one particular case and its key methodological approach was that of 'discourse analysis'; within the study, however, there were clear methodological decisions characteristic of a case study approach.

The study had a number of research questions (as well as the overall question, "What are the perceptions and experiences of academics in terms of programme design/delivery?") and those directly relating to this paper included:

- How do academics perceive the Foundation degree at University A?
- What are the critical themes relating to the design and delivery of the Foundation degree programme at University A?

The first stage involved interviews with academics and employers involved in managing and delivering the programme.² The second stage of interviews was with senior managers within University A Business School and the Vice Chancellor's Executive. The aim of the sampling process was to access individuals in various roles across the university involved with the Foundation degree programme.

The researchers identified a significant gap within the discourse around this particular topic and that the findings from this study would contribute to the body of knowledge and understanding in this topic and provide foundations on which to build further discourses in future research studies. The emphasis was upon real world research and the richness of the data gathered in order to shed new light on the themes and concerns raised. This study was focused upon providing explanations rather than wider societal generalizations. This provides the justification for a smaller sample size, also supported by the underlying function of discourse analysis which focuses upon the context and 'text, not the individual':

"If collecting text for discourse analysis via interviews, typically only a relatively small sample of respondents will be involved in the study. This is because the focus is on the text, not the individual and because the aim is provide an in-depth analysis that is focused on explanation, rather than generalization." (Dick In: Cassell and Symon 2004, p. 207)

Each interview participant was approached with a predefined agenda to be discussed which in turn depended on the role or position of the individual. An interview guide was produced which included key interview topics reflecting the research questions.

The interviews were very fluid and interviewees were encouraged to introduce themes or concerns that they felt were relevant to the research. The interview guides were there as a prompt to ensure that all relevant topics of the research were covered, but in all the interviews there was not a prescribed order to discuss identified topics and interviewees had the freedom to go back and forth returning to previous discussion points.

² The views of employers are beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses upon views of academics. Future in-depth research will, however, involve analysis of the employers' voices.

Within discourse analysis, it is important that interviews are fully transcribed and with the permission of the interviewees each interview was digitally recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Notes were also made throughout the transcripts of any specific 'peculiarities': for example, if there were significant pauses, hesitations or any instances where the interviewee talked over the interviewer. The presence of two researchers at all the interviews also provided the opportunity to note any further peculiarities relating to non-verbal signs, such as frowns and shoulder shrugs.

Analysis of the interview data involved an iterative process where the researchers read and re-read the transcripts in order to develop a coding system which was then applied to the interview data. In analyzing the transcripts, the researchers considered and explored why they were reading text in a particular way and what features of the text produced this reading as suggested by Potter and Wetherell, 1987 (In: Flick 2009, p339). The pedagogic concerns which emerged were largely centered on the consequences arising from how the programme was delivered.

The qualitative method used within this paper has strong grounding in previous research. The classical definition of a case study is,

“an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2003: 13).

Whilst there are problems of generalisability, of course, with such research, it is also possible to theorise based upon in-depth case studies. This is because we are not endeavouring to produce statistically significant, representative, weighted survey-type evidence – but, on the contrary, deep explanations of the themes that occur. The limitations of such approaches can be overcome by discourse analyses, a particular form of qualitative method that has firm academic credentials and is well established (see, for example, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Brown and Yule, 1983; Chia, 2000; Gee 1999; Grant et al, 2001; Thomas, 2003; Wetherell et al, 2001), and can be used, for example, in understanding change in organisations (Grant et al, 2005). However, discourse analysis must also be considered critically, given its “ontological, epistemological and theoretical weaknesses” (Reed, 2000: 524). The analysis and

discussion, in the next section, requires this particular form of analysis as a way of gaining deep insights into the perceptions and experiences of the participants. Given this approach, the sample size was deemed appropriate as Cassell and Symon (2004: 16) argue, “a researcher using a discourse analytic approach would probably use far fewer interviews than one taking a realistic case study approach.”

4. Results and Discussion

During the in-depth interviews, interviewees were encouraged to discuss those themes that they felt were relevant to the research. This resulted in a number of key themes emerging from the research and this section analyses this discourse in more detail, drawing on the rich quotes from the research participants. The three themes identified concerned the intensity of the learning experience, tensions among academics in delivering on this type of programme and the pressure on academics to ‘get it right first time’ were all inextricably linked to the way in which the programme was delivered. A further theme emerged regarding specific academic support for students on this type of programme.

4.1 Master class delivery

The programme is delivered in blocks of study and through master classes. The decision to deliver the programme in such a way came from employer feedback:

“...we had research from our employers and employer members to say what they were looking for and the idea of the master class really came from the employer feedback, they didn’t want it to be tied into academic timetables they wanted a roll on roll off approach, a step-on step-off onto the different modules so there was flexibility there...” (Interviewee D)

Initially, suggestions from the University were more geared towards week long blocks but it became apparent that this approach was not going to work in terms of getting students on the programme:

“... it became fairly clear that if we did it like that... then we wouldn't get any students on the programme, they just couldn't afford to release them for a week and the word came back the maximum they could probably release them for was something like two days every now and then ..” (Interviewee B)

The flexible delivery was generally seen as a real strength but it was a more complicated approach largely because delegates had the options to 'step-on step-off' the programme. The research findings have undoubtedly revealed tensions among some academics in terms of delivering in this way. Change is not always welcome, particularly when programmes have been delivered in a particular way for many years, but there was some sense that a cultural shift needed to happen among some staff which could lead to further flexibility in the deployment of resources:

“...one of the problems that we have is a cultural shift in the delivery of it from what we're used to in academia, and we found that staffing it can be pretty difficult..” (Interviewee E)

There were a number of questions that emerged from the research, particularly in terms of whether or not staff were available to deliver on these types of programmes, whether they had the appropriate knowledge, expertise and skills and there was also concern about their willingness to be involved with such programmes.

“Have we got the available staff with the level of knowledge and expertise to deliver the programmes? Are staff willing to engage with a different format of delivery which is in blocks, potentially in holiday time and so forth.”

(Interviewee F)

4.2 Staff tensions

Some of the tensions among academics clearly related to resourcing such programmes, for example the hours that an academic teaching on a programme should be allocated.

“So I think the resourcing model, in terms of if you have to do a lot of VLE [Virtual Learning Environment] support with chamber students, are we allocating the resource right for that at the moment? Possibly not. If you have to develop a whole set of open learning material to support learners on the chamber programme, did we give you proper time to develop that? Possibly not...we recognise the issue and we are making that our priority this year to try and sort it out, so that people don't feel unfairly treated.” (Interviewee A)

“So getting the resourcing of it right is about a culture shift. And I think in fairness, most people who come to work here now, are more interested in research than they probably were a few years ago but I think they also are more interested in this business facing agenda. And I think if they wanted to teach traditional 3 year undergraduates they would not come to a University like ours.” (Interviewee A)

The resource problem was reflected in a number of the interviews and is a key theme. As with many developments, resources follow success and the research findings clearly supported the need for a more coherent and joined-up approach in terms of managing this programme:

“... we've got some really good people from within this school onboard, but sometimes, to be honest with you, you feel a little bit disjointed, from the school, because it hasn't really got its own identity, we haven't got our own subject group, we haven't got our own group of people, we have to beg, borrow and steal people where we can ...” (Interviewee E)

There were concerns about the changes in the structure of the academic year that some academics were presented with as they are increasingly required to teach during what has traditionally been regarded as time for holiday and/or research (for example in July and August). The delivery of the Programme is very different to that of other programmes which are mostly delivered in weekly lectures and seminars throughout the academic year. The timing of the block delivery which happens out of semester time can be problematic on a personal level particularly in terms of fitting in holidays:

“.. I think we just need to be mindful of workloads and goodwill stuff and asking staff to come in and so forth because I think there has to be some turning point and I think it’s coming, but I think it is only very very slow.” (Interviewee F)

Concerns were evident regarding staff involvement in delivering on such programmes and there was some evidence to suggest that colleagues were protective of their usual delivery approach. Some of the findings almost suggested a change in mindset was needed if more staff were to become involved in delivering programmes in this way.

While it was commented on in a matter of fact way, there are clear implications to staff morale in delivering on these kinds of programmes and there is a need to promote more of a collegiate environment. To some extent, it could be argued that this might be a natural occurrence with the growth of such programmes and patterns of delivery but it is important that this concern does not remain unchecked.

The above clearly highlights tensions among academics concerning the delivery model, particularly in respect of resourcing it. However, despite these evident tensions, there was a general support for flexible delivery as long as it was managed and resourced appropriately and effectively so as not to undermine the quality of the learning experience.

There was, however, another concern raised by academic staff that can be seen as a particular tension in that the drive for more flexible delivery should not be at the expense of the quality of the learning as the following quotes highlight:

“..we shouldn’t lose sight of the necessity and the importance of allowing sufficient time for qualitative learning to take place..... there is a drive to deliver which sometimes forgets the importance of the quality of the product and the process, especially process ... processes need to take place in order for that final product to be of quality and that can’t be rushed.” (Interviewee G)

“So I’m very supportive for flexibility, provided we don’t throw the pedagogic baby out with the bath water.” (Interviewee G)

A number of interviewees commented on the pedagogy of such programmes and they were notably conscious of the fact that a lot of content had to be delivered over a short period of time:

“I think I would prefer it where you have them for one day then maybe three weeks later you have them for another day so that you can get them to do something in between the weeks. It is hard hitting for them and there is a lot of information that we throw at them over the 2 days.” (Interviewee F)

In addition to this, there was concern about the need to ensure that content was delivered in an interactive and interesting way. Delivering in blocks places increasing pressure on the academic to ‘get it right first time’:

“.. if you’re only there a day and half, it’s got to be interactive, it’s got to be interesting, otherwise we don’t get the repeat business, they will just disengage from the process.” (Interviewee E)

The delivery model is clearly a critical aspect and has led to a number of academic tensions which, if remained unchecked, could undermine effective pedagogic practices. However, despite these evident tensions, the unique delivery model of this programme was and still is very much seen as critical to the continued success of the programme:

“I think the delivery model that we have now is something very different and something very unique in the University’s experience.” (Interviewee A)

4.3 Student support

A further notable pedagogic concern which emerged from the research was centered on the academic support for students on this type of programme. It is interesting to note that the needs of the students have been central in the design of this programme notably through the delivery mechanisms which were specifically tailored to meet the requirements of the students. The master class delivery was the result of feedback that had been received from employers of potential students on this programme. It was apparent that they would not release their employees to complete this programme for more than a couple of days:

“...the word came back that the maximum they could probably release them for was something like two days every now and then.....” (Interviewee B)

The nature of this delivery however subsequently led to concerns about supporting students and throughout the interviews a number of key themes emerged. There was notable concern about what happens once the master class is delivered, potentially there is no other contact with the student:

“Well this is an issue isn’t it because once we go off site, after teaching, I do not get to speak to them or see them ever again. Although there is email contact I have with them, there is email, we are remote aren’t we? We can send things through Blackboard or everything is done electronically. Now I sort of think that is not a good thing because I think they do need more support.” (Interviewee F)

There was a suggestion that some other mechanisms should be put in place for there to be face to face contact with the student other than that provided in the master class. This was seen as a particular benefit in providing additional support to the students in completing assignments for the modules:

“.. I think it would be helpful if the tutor who ran the block programme was to go up so many weeks before the assignment was due and run maybe like an informal drop in session. Give them the opportunity, you know I would be there on site and people could come and sit down and just run through queries to do with the assignment because nearly every student has them...I would prefer face to face contact and I think that would be something they would welcome as well.”

(Interviewee F)

Without doubt, the virtual learning environment systems in place were and remain critical in terms of supporting students. There were some perceived and arguably inevitable teething problems at the outset, but the findings revealed overwhelming support for the systems in place:

“It couldn’t work unless you’ve got good VLE support, but it seems to be the VLE has been a bit erratic but I think generally speaking it is good supporting the programme...” (Interviewee B)

While the above clearly demonstrates the link and relationship between academic support and programme delivery, further concerns about academic support did emerge that were not directly linked to the way in which the programme was delivered. Many of the students on this type of programme had not been in education for many years or studied at HE level. Mechanisms need to be in place to ensure that students who fall within this category have access to a range of learning and study skills material and the required support to help them achieve their full potential on the Programme. This leads to an increased onus on academic staff to ensure that such support is easily accessible to ensure these student needs are satisfied.

“I think we have got to be mindful that they do not fully understand the academic... and when we are talking about referencing that is something that I picked up because I have done before my teaching slots, I have done a number of moderation of the assignments. Even referencing, in the majority of cases, they could not reference appropriately.” (Interviewee F)

The findings from the research as outlined above very much supported opportunities for further face to face contact with students and is something that should be taken into consideration in further developments. Academics expressed that some students in particular required one to one contact for support and re-assurance. Supporting students effectively is a clear pedagogic challenge for those involved in designing and delivering this type of Programme. It is important to note that because of the ‘type of student’ attracted to such a Programme, supporting their needs is a pedagogic challenge in itself but it became clearly evident that the problem is exacerbated when delivery and contact is as infrequent as it is with the master class delivery.

5. Conclusions and Implications

Given the policy context in terms of the strategies of various UK Governments towards the linkages between universities and businesses on a number of different dimensions (e.g. 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 paper's findings are of particular salience. The discussion of the key themes in the design and delivery of the work based learning programme has provided evidence that these themes are clearly intertwined and related to how the programme is delivered. What is evident, however, is that these predominantly pedagogic concerns are not insurmountable and, with effective management and leadership, very successful partnerships between the HE sector and employers can develop and flourish. It is, however, important to acknowledge that such initiatives can present many challenges and probably the most challenging of all is related to the entrenched practices in HE in respect of many academics' traditional modes of delivery.

A number of critical themes have been identified within the findings section and all play a significant role in terms of future developments. It is evident from the research that greater knowledge and understanding has developed as a result of this development and important lessons have been learnt from this experience: *"... it's given a phenomenal insight into things we can do to engage employers and it's given us experience of really what employers want from employer engagement."* (Interviewee E)

There are a number of themes raised in this paper which need to be considered in taking forward the Leadership and Management Foundation degree and other work-based learning programmes. In terms of programme design and delivery in meeting the employer engagement agenda then the model identified of developing a bespoke programme that is responsive to employer needs, flexible in delivery without compromising quality is a model of good practice for other higher education institutions to consider. The problem with delivering this agenda relates to the cultural shift that is needed in recruiting the right staff to deliver this type of programme and providing the appropriate resources and support for those involved because of the complex nature of the programme and wide range of stakeholders involved. In terms of supporting students

on these programmes then a balance needs to be struck between offering comprehensive VLE support in addition to master classes and ongoing face to face support which is sometimes required early on in this type of programme. There are many examples across the sector of good practice in delivering work based learning programmes but a step change in culture is needed if work based learning is to be fully embraced as a fundamental part of what HE does.

There are a number of potential limitations of qualitative methodological approaches. These include, most notably, the relatively small sample size, although it was not our intention to generalize to the population – because of our focus upon a particular case and key informants involved therein and our aim to provide an explanatory rather than simply descriptive (even if ‘representative’) account. However, the qualitative research design, discourse analysis (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Brown and Yule, 1983; Chia, 2000; Gee 1999; Grant et al, 2001; Thomas, 2003; Wetherell et al, 2001) and case study (Yin, 2004) analytical approach enabled rich, in-depth analysis of the phenomenon being researched, especially considering the gap within this topic’s discourse and the focus of discourse analysis upon the text, not the individual, (Dick In: Cassell and Symon 2004, p. 207). The key limitation of discourse analysis, however, relate to “ontological, epistemological and theoretical weaknesses” identified by Reed (2000: 524). Despite this limitation, we do believe that discourse analysis has enabled us to make a novel – and rich – qualitative contribution to this research topic and the wider literature on WBL.

The key novel contributions of our study to knowledge are two-fold. First, the paper addresses the critical gap in the literature on practice within WBL programmes from the perspective of academics. Although literature on WBL is extensive (Rainbird, 2000; Felstead et al, 2009) and addresses a number of important research questions and themes (e.g. Fuller et al, 2004; Gray et al, 2004; Grugulis, 2007; Lee et al, 2004; Rainbird and Munro, 2003; Rainbird et al, 2005), this study has provided – utilizing a rich, in-depth discourse analytical approach – novel evidence, from the academic’s perspective, on the intensity of the learning experience, academics’ tensions and pressures, and learning support for students. Second, given that, ‘the most effective classroom is often the workplace itself’ (Felstead et al, 2005), the paper also provides important evidence of relevance to employers considering university WBL linkages.

Several implications for policy, WBL pedagogical practice, employees (students/learners) and employers, therefore, have arisen from this study. From a policy perspective, policy-makers and universities ought to encourage this type of WBL programme whilst addressing the three key themes that have arisen. For academics and their managers, tradeoffs are required in order to deliver such programmes in a significantly more flexible way (a 'carrot' approach), rather than attempting to impose these new delivery methods unilaterally (the 'stick'). For employers and their employees (the learners on these WBL programmes), consequently, universities addressing issues of the learning experience and student support would enhance the potential for the programmes to achieve the most optimal learning outcomes and thus contribute to organisational performance for the employers who sponsor or pay for the WBL programme being delivered to their staff.

Future research ought to look, in particular, at the voices of employers in these work-based programmes, most notably given the concerns raised by Reeve and Gallacher (2005) and Smith and Preece (2009) that employers were essentially unwilling to engage and also concerning cultural differences between universities and largely private-sector employees – although insight is provided by prior research into work-based learning of public sector employers (Rainbird and Munro, 2003), especially in terms of the 'unintended consequences' of policy (Rainbird et al, 2005). Finally, the extension of apprenticeships into workplace based employer-university partnered foundation degrees (Ainley and Rainbird, 1999) offers a key theoretical perspective from which employer-university partnered WBL programmes can be analysed and enhanced.

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