Work Based Learning: The leadership challenges for colleges & businesses

P. Hubert, E. Sallis and J. Pearce
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Contact Details

LSIS: Learning and Skills Improvement Service
Friars House
Manor House Drive
Coventry CV1 2TE
Switchboard: 024 7662 7900 Enquiries: 024 7662 7953 or enquiries@lsis.org.uk www.lsis.org.uk
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Executive Summary

The project examined the role of work-based learning in foundation degrees. Most colleges placed considerable responsibility for securing placements on students which implies the existence of a leadership vacuum in the relationship between colleges and industry. In practice lecturers often used their personal contacts with industry to assist students find appropriate placements. Assessment was generally restricted to professional skills with learning outcomes worded to encompass a broad range of student experience.

Crucially, Highlands College adopted an HE strategy which clearly articulated that work-based learning was at the core of foundation degrees. The College developed extensive relationships with industry and designed a curriculum that met their needs. In return industry had to participate in the delivery of that curriculum, i.e., students had to achieve many of the subject specific learning outcomes during work placements which constituted 50% of the course. This required college managers to develop leadership based relationships with key individuals in businesses to persuade them that the benefits to their organisation of this level of involvement were worthwhile.

Introduction

This practitioner research project had its origins in work that one of the authors carried out in 2007 to design a unique Foundation Degree in Financial Services for the industry in Jersey (Pearce 2007). While all Foundation degrees have to contain work-based learning (WBL), the aim of this degree was to make WBL the core of the qualification. Students were in the work place for 750 hours a year in six week blocks and the academic year was extended to 44 weeks. Importantly the international banks who provide the placements undertook to pay the students while they were working for them. This approach to using WBL has been extended to other foundation degree programmes at Highlands College, most notably on the IT for Business degree. Placing this emphasis on WBL throws up its own challenges but most notably in how WBL is led. Jersey’s industry has taken a very close interest in this aspect of the degrees. Indeed it would have been impossible to design a curriculum without the extensive involvement of the industry given that they were going to have the responsibility for providing suitable WBL opportunities that met the requirements of the curriculum. They also helped in the promotion and acceptance of common protocols. This has significant implications for the relationships between the college and providers of WBL placements, and the relationships between the businesses and the students they host. To make this a success, especially when dealing with high profile global businesses, it is essential to address the leadership issues and to look at models that make sense not just from a college perspective but also from that of the business itself.

Highlands College in Jersey is fortunate to be a member of the University of Plymouth Colleges Network. It is one of the larger FE/HE partnerships in the country covering colleges from Cornwall to Bristol, and it was decided that the quest for
models of leadership should be extended to looking at how foundation degrees were led across the partnership.

**Area of Research and Main Questions**

The Chief Executive of Foundation Degree Forward, Professor Derek Longhurst, is quoted in the Times Higher as saying that universities can ‘no longer be regarded as the primary context of learning and knowledge production in 21st century and that the workplace can be developed as a significant learning environment’. He went on to say that WBL will flourish once there was leadership engagement ‘in a committed and strategic way with the challenges of work based learning alongside the more traditional on-campus provision’ (Fearn 2009).

WBL is increasingly seen to be of strategic importance to most providers and a growing number of businesses. For providers, WBL is moving from being a cottage industry which involves a few enthusiastic staff, towards being an activity with people and processes that are an integral part of the main stream provision. For the businesses, WBL is becoming a prime means of developing the higher level knowledge, skills and attitudes that businesses require to compete in global markets.

The questions that this project aims to answer are:

- What are the leadership challenges involved in WBL in the sector and in businesses?
- What are the drivers for developing effective leadership of WBL?
- What lessons can research provide on leading WBL that have general applicability for providers and businesses?

The premise was that if providers in the sector and business leaders understand sufficiently the challenges of WBL and have the tools to take a strategic view, then WBL will become more effective and will have a greater impact on students and their learning.

The starting point was to identify successful and innovative WBL strategies related to foundation degree programmes in members of the University of Plymouth Colleges partnership. Analysis of the processes used to establish and run the WBL placements, from both the employers’ and colleges’ perspectives, were examined to determine how leadership had been exercised.

**Literature Review**

There is a significant body of literature on WBL but much of it is written in the context of HE institutions and their engagement with employers. However, there is little research on the leadership aspects of this and in particular there is a need to increase research on how college and business leaders can meet its challenges.
Students undertake work associated with their course in a variety of ways, typically as a period of work experience. WBL is seen as more than just undertaking work experience. Longhurst (2009 p15) refers to a typology of characteristics for courses with placements and WBL courses (see Table 1) presented by David Boud at the 2005 fdf National Conference.

**Table 1 - Typology of characteristics for courses with placements and WBL courses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Conventional courses with placement</th>
<th>WBL courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content base</td>
<td>Academic/professional</td>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Disciplinary/occupational/professional</td>
<td>Transdisciplinary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Pre-determined</td>
<td>Emergent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student control</td>
<td>Minimal negotiation</td>
<td>Fully-negotiated (three-way)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student managed</td>
<td>Partial</td>
<td>Extensive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of student</td>
<td>Mostly pre-employment</td>
<td>In existing/continuing employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student aspiration</td>
<td>Enter full-time employment or confirmation of employment</td>
<td>Continuing development in existing/promoted position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staffing</td>
<td>Academic teachers, placement supervisors</td>
<td>Academic supervisors, existing workplace supervisors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Longhurst refers to the framework proposed by Felstead et al (Improving Working as Learning, 2009), when discussing productive systems.

“The establishment of effective workplace learning requires analysis and understanding of the systems of power and socio-economic relationships that configure the context within which the learning process is to take place. In the design and development of WBL it is necessary to take account of the relationships and pressure both within the organisation and beyond it that will potentially determine the outcomes of the learning processes.”

(Longhurst, 2009)

This will necessarily have significant implications for how leadership is exercised in bringing WBL into existence within an organisation and how successful learning outcomes are achieved. The need for formal agreements with partners laying out what each party would contribute and how processes would operate was stressed by
Benyon et al (2009). There should be multiple methods of communication between partners to sustain the ongoing engagement of employers. Part of that communication should gather feedback from employers which must be acted on.

Thurgate et al state that:

“While the role of employers in designing the FD may be perceived as a driver in the successful development of the FD, it is the role undertaken by employers in delivering the programme that is perceived as a major risk in employers’ willingness to adopt FDs in the workplace.”

(Thurgate et al 2007)

One of the reasons this can arise is that employers and students have different objectives in relation to study at Level 4 and above. Learners are attempting to increase their capabilities or gain recognition for them, while employers think in terms of the beneficial outcomes for their businesses, often in a restricted time frame (Connor, 2007).

Nixon et al (2006) categorised WBL as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1.** Typology of Work-based Learning

- **Individual driven**
  - **Type 1** Investing in learning to improve personal performance in securing new work
  - **Type 3** Investing in learning to improve personal and professional performance in existing work/organisation

- **Informal relationship (not employed)**
  - **Type 2** Investing in learning to bring knowledge and skills into the organisation

- **Formal relationship (employed)**
  - **Type 4** Investing in learning to improve the organisation’s performance and competitiveness

- **Organisation driven**
Nixon et al (2006) considered it critical to the design of effective WBL that employers’ needs were appropriately diagnosed. They conclude that staff development is important to address this issue and help academic staff who are operating at the interface between HE and industry, particularly in institutions that have a devolved model of employer engagement and lack centralised support.

In establishing relationships between organisations Foskett (2003) provides some insight:

> “Trust between organisations rarely exists; it is in reality trust between individuals that is the cement in the relationship and which will ensure sustainability. This clearly depends on stability of personnel until completion of the job.”
> (Foskett, 2003)

Furthermore, (ibid) ‘The partners should feel that there is equality and that they all have an equal say but not at the expense of clear leadership and management of the project.’ Successive evaluations of the factors that contribute to successful collaboration between HEIs, colleges and employers have concluded that it requires time, space and resources. Each partner needs regular face-to-face contact to build understanding of the differing cultures in the three types of organisation (Doyle, 2006; Foskett, 2003; Mullen and Kilgannon, 2007; Thurgate and MacGregor, 2008).

When developing, sustaining and leading partnerships for WBL a HERDA-SW (Higher Education Regional Development Agency – South West) report (Bolden et al 2009) identified the following factors as supporting enduring partnerships:

- An academic with a passion for developing and maintaining the work with employers;
- A collaborative approach by partners to combining their understanding and knowledge as they develop and manage the work of the partnership;
- Clarity of roles achieved by agreement and explicitly articulated, particularly for larger partnerships;
- Buy-in needs to be achieved by each of the partners;
- Continuity of individuals in the partnership as strong relationships are interpersonal rather than inter-organisational;
- Support at senior level, often at the early stages of collaboration and at key moments where necessary;
- Ongoing leadership that has been delegated to individuals so that action can be taken between meetings.

Recognition of complex leadership needs, i.e., different aspects of the work may require different types of leadership whether it is project management, managing relationships, planning and implementing programmes and maintaining progress.

Bolden et al (2009), in the context of HEIs, articulated a need for a flexible approach by academics in the execution of their role where they support bridging of the cultural
gap between academia and business. This is often easier in FECs where lecturers have often worked in the industry in the past. They highlighted the need for recognition or incentives for academics to take on the task of engagement with industry. Often such work is added on without significant reduction in existing workload. They identified the following necessary roles to sustain the initiative:

- Project champion;
- Project manager;
- Lead academic;
- Steering group;
- Intermediary/broker;
- Strategic partner/sponsor.

It was deemed entirely possible that a single individual could fulfil more than one of the roles. They also proposed four key questions in relation to developing, sustaining and leading the partnership:

- “Are the necessary people in place to see the initiative through to completion and do we have a contingency plan if they leave?
- Is a sufficient level of senior support available within the organisations to overcome any political/practical barriers that may be encountered?
- Are we collecting appropriate evidence to indicate the impact of such initiatives for learners and employers such that they continue to see the value of being involved?
- Do we have a sense of how this initiative may be sustained over time and/or contribute towards the development/updating of other teaching research and student support activities?”

(Bolden et al 2009, p42)

It was deemed important that the factors that had an impact on the success of HE employer engagement initiatives could be grouped into staffing, culture and systems, and funding.

The CBI (2009) identified the following major common themes that contribute to successful employer engagement by colleges:

- Commitment to employer engagement throughout a college;
- A focus on the employer as the primary client;
- Getting the message across to employers of what the college has to offer;
- Conducting dialogue about training in business terms;
- Having a clear and responsive college point of contact for employers;
- The value of effective CRM (Customer Relationship Management) systems;
- The benefits of explicit service standards;
- Drawing on the college USPs (Unique Selling Points) of continuity and funding expertise;
- Having the right staff in place to deliver employer-backed programmes;
Achieving flexibility in delivery;
Building networks with other training providers;
Motivating learners;
Managing funding effectively;
Agreeing measurable objectives for each programme;
Drawing on the experience of work with employers to enhance college effectiveness.

Employers can be perceived as reluctant to train employees but in the UK 52% of companies with more than 5000 employees were using university provision. However, for companies with less than 50 employees only 15% used HE and 20% used FE for training (CBI 2007). With so few companies in Jersey having in excess of 50 employees and no local university it is unsurprising that so few companies look to Highlands for HE provision. Only 340 businesses in Jersey employ more than 20 staff.

**Methodology**

The literature review revealed what factors are currently considered to contribute to good practice in the organisation of WBL. This was used as the basis for writing questionnaires and planning the content of semi-structured interviews with academic staff in FECs and HEIs running WBL, and host employers. The questions were tested with staff teaching foundation degrees within Highlands College and modified before wider use. The intention was to determine the processes by which they had set up and run WBL. Interviews were conducted with 7 FECs, 3 HEIs and 5 businesses as well as organisations representing FE and HE. Where more extensive interviews and data gathering were possible case studies were constructed to provide greater depth understanding. It was anticipated that this would show that a number of different models of WBL practice are in operation. The response to the online questionnaire was limited, prohibiting separate analysis that would have been meaningful, so the data gathered this way was amalgamated with the interview outcomes.

**Research Findings**

**Highlands College – a case study**

In Jersey, Highlands College adopted a different approach in the development of its FdA Financial Services, FdSc IT for Business and FdA Childhood Studies in response to the Island’s HE strategy. Jersey’s HE Development Group recommended the formation of a University Centre whose mission was to provide appropriate degree programmes for each of the Island’s major industries and employment sectors where there was sufficient demand. The University Centre’s first business plan articulated the philosophy that underpinned its mission. Crucially for WBL this included:

- Vocational and Island relevance;
- A distinctive student experience through the incorporation of WBL;
Close working with employers in the delivery of degree programmes.

The financial services industry is the major wealth producer and a significant employer on the Island. It faced a shortage of particular technical and high level soft skills. Furthermore, IT underpins the ability of the financial services to operate globally. Local regulations governing who is eligible to live and work on the Island mean that Jersey has a very high proportion of its working age female population in employment. Consequently there is a high demand for childcare.

The idea of taking a degree “off the shelf” for each of these sectors was rejected as there was nothing available that provided an appropriate match for the Island’s needs. For each degree the Principal presented the case to the Island’s Economic Development and Education departments for funding to develop new curricula. This required market research to identify the curriculum content for each sectors’ needs. For the financial services industry, Jersey Finance, the industry promotion body, acted as the project steering group and undertook an extensive skills survey of their member companies. Persuading this organisation to be involved lent credibility to the College’s intentions. In addition the College employed a work placement co-ordinator to persuade companies to take placement students and monitor their progress. Critically this individual was a recently retired and well connected senior figure from the industry. At this point in the process all six of Bolden et al’s (2009) roles considered necessary to sustain development were in place.

The majority of IT activity in Jersey is in a supporting role in a business whose revenue generation is in another sector, e.g., financial services or law. With no strong industry body equivalent to Jersey Finance for IT in the Island, the IT degree had to be approached slightly differently. The IT Curriculum Manager, using his connections in the local branch of the British Computer Society set up a series of group and one-to-one meetings with key individuals. He used the meetings to communicate the College’s vision for involvement with the sector, and in return find out what the industry wanted from the College. These meetings included staff from the Island’s Economic Development Department so that when a request for development funding for a foundation degree was submitted they were aware of the background and understood how it fitted with their department’s objectives. As a result of this dialogue the foundation degree was developed and through subsequent consultation, modified. By being seen to listen to the industry, by responding to the industry’s constructive criticism, by explaining what was possible and what was needed from the industry to deliver what the industry wanted, the Curriculum Manager gained the support and commitment of the industry. By including employers extensively in these early discussions a sense of partnership was created. Crucial to this example of leadership was the establishment and nurturing of numerous relationships with key industry figures and senior managers in the organisations that had large IT departments. The mixture of meetings with individuals and groups not only grew the relationships, but in exposing individuals to groups, helped to provide assurance that the proposed foundation degree development was a shared enterprise, a shared responsibility and of collective benefit. On occasions it was possible to recruit the more positive group members to help overcome the reservations of others. In exchange for the College providing a course with content aligned to the industry’s needs they had to agree to provide work placements for the students. Although this might be considered an example of transactional leadership, its effectiveness was
not universal as the Curriculum Manager still had to make numerous phone calls and hold meetings with senior managers in companies to secure the full number of placements.

With the Financial Services degree the teaching of technical skills provided a challenge as the College had no staff with those skills. The necessary expertise lay in the industry itself which therefore had to be recruited to assist with the delivery of part of the curriculum in the form of WBL. With the other two degrees this was less of an issue.

Despite having designed a curriculum to a specification developed and agreed with the industry there was no guarantee that the College’s graduates would be more desirable employees than those who had travelled the conventional route of a degree at a mainland university before returning to the island. This combination of factors led to the WBL component of on-island degrees being at least 50% of the course.

Part of the problem for both the Financial Services and IT for Business degrees was that employers were used to having work experience students who spend two or three weeks with them, are aged 14 – 18 and are unable to make any real contribution to the organisation, i.e., they were an additional burden. Overcoming this negative perception of work placement was a crucial step. Foundation degree students were to be placed with employers for extended periods of months rather than weeks. They were not there to have experience of the workplace but to undertake real work for the employer. The students would have to achieve specific learning objectives related to their technical discipline during a placement rather than generic professional development criteria. The learning could only take place by engaging in significant project work which mapped to the technical learning outcomes. The prospect of being able to ‘road test’ a potential future employee without the long term commitment of the normal recruitment process and its inherent lack of reliability was attractive. Local employers were making a substantial investment in the College’s students that in time could be converted into good employees with minimal risk beyond the short term.

The periods of college and WBL for the FdSc IT for Business are shown in the diagram below:

**Figure 2 - FdSc IT for Business course structure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Sept</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>Jan</th>
<th>Feb</th>
<th>Mar</th>
<th>Apr</th>
<th>May</th>
<th>Jun</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>Aug</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>WCU 1</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>WCU 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>WCU 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>WCU 4</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WCU = Work-centred Unit

With both the Financial Services and IT for Business foundation degrees in Jersey it was important to match the student to the organisation, but also to minimise the time and effort required to achieve this. Therefore, all the participating employers and students were brought together for interviews conducted on a ‘speed dating’ basis. As part of their professional skills programme students were prepared for this activity
and were expected to treat it as seriously as any job interview. For the Financial Services degree where students go out on placement after a few weeks, the early learning in college focussed on the soft skills they need in placement. In contrast the IT for Business degree concentrates the first fourteen weeks on developing technical knowledge and skills in college so when the students went out they were ready to undertake practical work for the employer.

To help ensure that the students got a positive experience from the placement, the College trained workplace mentors from each of the placement organisations. Not only did this improve the quality of experience for the student, it was a way of the College giving something back to these companies who can then use the mentoring skills with their own employees.

It was thought important that WBL developed:

- Employability knowledge, skills and behaviour;
- Generated new sector specific knowledge and skills;
- Gave students a chance to apply knowledge and skills that had been learnt in College.

The nature of this learning and how it was to be achieved was agreed between either, the College’s WBL Tutor, or the Programme Manager, the workplace mentor and the student before placement commenced. As part of the WBL, performance was assessed through a reflective log, coursework to be completed during WBL, and regular reviews with the College’s WBL Tutor and the workplace mentor.

Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth – a case study

The Early Years programme in the University of Plymouth’s Faculty of Education had also placed WBL at the heart of the curriculum and the teaching team clearly demonstrated leadership in making it an integrated aspect of the programme.

This approach came from work on the BA (Honours) module entitled ‘Work Based Learning: learning beyond the University’, which required students to complete at least 50 hours of placement in an appropriate work setting. The placement provided the opportunity to reflect upon the experience so students could demonstrate their ability to empathise, to think deeply about the work they did and develop the skills of learning from experience.

The tutors were clear that self-reflection was not a skill that students could just pick-up, and considerable thought had been put into the preparation for going into the placement. The key was the keeping of a journal. While many courses use this vehicle, on this degree it was seen as a “professional friend for life,” which helped students learn from their behaviour, their underlying values, and assess the impact on their practice. The aim of the journal was to develop the ability to reflect on action and thereby engage in a personal journey of lifelong learning. It was envisaged as the students’ constant companion, not for assessment, but as a resource for use when writing assignments or producing seminar papers. It was not a diary, although there were aspects of that, but a “friend” to help students think deeply about their experiences. To prepare them for writing the journal students received mentoring and
writing tuition to facilitate the expression of their feelings in words, although it could also be in pictures, diagrams or a range of other mediums. As the handbook puts it:

“Keeping a journal is common professional practice to facilitate... reflective processes. Noting the activities, thoughts, feelings of the day helps practitioners remain mindful of the work they are doing, the values they hold professionally and personally and how they manifest in practice. Themes and questions arise that might otherwise go unnoticed in the “busyness” of everyday working life. These can be unpacked and debated, internally and with peers to help the development of greater awareness, the increase of abilities and skills can begin to form the basis of your own theoretical development. Piaget kept journals on his children that formed the basis of his theories of child development, Vygotsky kept notes of his observation. Freud maintained perpetual dialogues with himself and his peers through written case notes and letters....”

(University of Plymouth, Faculty of Education WBL: learning beyond the University, September 2009)

Through the use of reflective learning, WBL was elevated into an important part of what it meant to be a professional and provided students with essential material by which they engaged in the journey of self-reflection. It was also a world away from some other courses where WBL was little more than work experience with no means of integrating theory and practice.

The University recognised the importance of this approach, not just for their own students, but for those on partner college foundation degrees. Bi-annual WBL meetings for ten partner colleges focussed on sharing good practice. The importance of these was to ensure that colleges understood the importance of integrating theory and practice. Because many partner colleges were more familiar with outcome driven NVQs these sessions provided them with the chance to address areas where the purpose of placement was to do more than demonstrate instrumental and operational skills. Colleges welcomed the leadership that came from these seminars which promoted the values of the University on the key issue of reflective practice.

The leadership lessons from the approach of the University of Plymouth’s Faculty of Education are:

- WBL should be at the heart of the programme;
- It is an important vehicle to integrate theory and practice;
- It can be used to develop key skills in students, in this case self-reflection;
- Considerable effort from staff is required to ensure that WBL achieves the goals set for it.
Colleges and Universities

The institutions that took part in this project had anything from a few tens of students on foundation degrees to about a thousand. There was a mixture of full and part time programmes with many of them being conversions from HNDs or HNCs. These progenitors will have almost certainly influenced the content of the newer foundation degree replacement and the structure of any WBL component. There were some obvious exceptions to this, for example, where courses had been directly developed in partnership with a company to meet their specific needs and the students were their employees. Not unsurprisingly, foundation degrees had most often been tailored to the available expertise in the institution.

In general the colleges had not devoted much time to developing a vision or strategy for WBL for their foundation degrees although there were isolated cases where specific WBL policies existed. Even where there was a formal strategy it covered degree provision in general rather than WBL in particular. The organisation and conduct of WBL was often left to the programme managers and as such was seen as an operational issue and practice often varied considerably between programmes within individual colleges. WBL was deemed a departmental matter rather than a college level issue. In the absence of clear policies, the experience of WBL was dependent on the enthusiasm of an individual staff member and their contacts and knowledge of the particular industry. HE orientated WBL had been built on the good FE–industry links that the colleges already had through apprenticeships, Train to Gain, advisory panels, trade organisations, etc. In this respect the colleges were significantly more advanced than universities. Furthermore, FE staff were deemed to be generally more flexible than HE staff in their approach to working with industry.

Some colleges recognised that in order to transform WBL from something at the margins of academic activity to a full, integral and complementary part of a course, it was necessary to accord it the appropriate status. However to achieve this, additional resource, particularly in the form of staff time, would need to be allocated. This was compounded in that it was thought that different sectors required different approaches to WBL. One university was proposing separate certification for successful completion of a period of WBL, something that was well established in another institution, as a means of enhancing the status of WBL. In an effort to bring some consistency to WBL a number of colleges were introducing new policies and systems including in one instance a CRM system and account management. However some colleges found the introduction of college wide policies for WBL had been a difficult process. They also wanted to introduce some professional qualifications/NVQs into some foundation degree programmes, something that was seen as a feature in other colleges.

Many colleges had handbooks providing comprehensive guidance to students, employers and workplace mentors about setting up and engaging in WBL placements. These handbooks took special care to lay out the responsibilities of each party, student, college and employer, in the placement arrangements. According to these handbooks much of the responsibility for identifying, contacting, and negotiating placements was placed on the student with the college only becoming involved at a later stage. The college’s role was generally described as providing guidance and support to students on placement. However, when
interviewed staff described the process of finding work placements as one where the programme manager’s contacts were also relied on fairly heavily.

Senior staff in one college stated that they aimed to make their foundation degree students work ready and better than those from HEIs. Their programme managers wanted to “switch on” their students to working in industry, get them “out of their comfort zones”, help them to gain confidence and by gaining experience in industry, improve their CVs.

The responsibility for developing a strategy for WBL was generally that of the HE manager, but in one example it arose as a natural consequence of the strategy to develop foundation degrees for the major sectors in the geographical area which was driven by the principal. Some colleges had adjusted their structure to include an HE unit.

The college handbooks also gave extensive guidance to employers and students about the processes associated with undertaking WBL. Interviews revealed that a wide variety of forms of WBL took place. Some courses used in-college simulations where it was difficult to find appropriate placements. Those professions where self-employment or freelance work is the norm, e.g., artists, needed other solutions such as setting up small businesses, undertaking commissions, taking up positions as artists in residence, etc. In other instances the placement was work-shadowing or undertaking projects either on or off an employer’s premises. In some cases the students are treated as fully integrated employees.

The most important leadership issues for colleges revolved around promoting the importance of WBL to businesses and matching college capability to the needs of business. More specifically it was considered by one college to be a critical success factor to have learning objectives that were relevant to the industry. The abundance of handbooks implies that colleges recognise the importance of having clear and consistent guidance and documentation for all parties involved. In leadership terms this lends weight to how seriously WBL is to be taken. The comprehensive nature of the handbooks with their examples of proformas to be used at various points in the WBL process implies the colleges are keen to be able to demonstrate that everyone involved has adequately discharged their responsibilities. On the other hand they acknowledge the need to minimise the bureaucracy to which a host organisation is subjected. Persuading organisations to get involved in WBL, which is essentially a process with long term and uncertain benefits, in exchange for bureaucratic tasks today, is an act of leadership. However, by not devoting sufficient resource to the task of relationship building, most colleges are not particularly skilled at selling WBL and the hosting of placement students to businesses.

**Employers**

The employers interviewed tended to view students little differently to other employees expecting them to undertake standard jobs and make a normal contribution to the company’s business. In Jersey this perception by employers had influenced how the students viewed themselves; in conversation they referred to themselves by their job role, e.g., fund administrator, rather than as a student.
Viewing the students as employees led employers to want no additional bureaucracy beyond that associated with a standard employee. Interviews with academic staff showed that they were cognisant of this but their handbooks nevertheless contained a number of proformas for completion by employers. Where placement students were paid by the company this was often subsidised or at a reduced rate compared to permanent employees. Consequently there was the temptation to view placement students as cheap labour. Employers acknowledged that providing work placements gave them the benefit of road testing potential future employees.

**Figure 3** - Force field diagram showing resistance to adoption of newly learnt knowledge and skills.

Mainland employers were either unaware of any support from the student's college or thought the support for the student was fine. However they did not want academics interfering in business activities or side-tracking the student. Some colleges provided
mentor training for workplace supervisors and one university viewed the provision of such training as a way of giving something back to employers. Employers that worked with Highlands College commented that they went on to use the mentoring skills with their own employees.

Where employers were sending their existing employees on foundation degree provision one provider talked of the resistance that the student can encounter when, in their workplace, they endeavour to implement change based on what they have learnt on the course. They explained the problem in terms of the force field diagram (figure 3).

To ensure that the learning that has taken place is utilised by the business, the provider considered it part of its role to try to get as many of the arrows on the right hand side of the diagram to point the other way. To achieve this they endeavoured to include peers in WBL, they used line managers as mentors for the students and they sought to obtain the support of senior management. Given that WBL is an opportunity to find the links between theory and practice, to have that opportunity stymied by organisational resistance negates the investment that the organisation has made either in sending its employee on the course or in agreeing to host a placement student.

**Analysis**

Boud’s (2005) typology of the characteristics for courses with placements and WBL courses implies that such courses fall into one of two categories. The evidence gathered in this project would indicate the picture is more complex. With Jersey courses the content base is a mixture of work, academic and professional with the curriculum being pre-determined. However, how the individual student receives the work-based element of the curriculum is subject to negotiation between the employer and the College. Most of the students are pre-employment and aspire to employment in the relevant business sector. Likewise the staffing for the course is firmly in the realm of academic teachers supported by placement supervisors.

For the other colleges there appears to be a dichotomy between what is presented in WBL handbooks, where the student is largely responsible for identifying and negotiating a placement with an employer, and in practice the extensive use of tutor contacts to place students. Once in placement, although the students were undertaking real work for the employer they were generally only being assessed on the reflective skills they developed during the period. This type of foundation degree fits Boud’s category for conventional courses with placements. The Jersey courses fit in between Boud’s two categories with elements of both. This implies that Boud’s categories should instead be viewed as the two ends of a spectrum of practice for courses with WBL.

Looking at Nixon et al’s (2006) typology for WBL it was clear that in the colleges interviewed there were situations that could be matched against each of the four categories. In Jersey as the students were all not employed by their placement organisations and were intent on acquiring sector specific knowledge and skills in order to secure future employment, they satisfy the Type 1 criteria. The companies in
hosting placement students and treating it as an extended interview were investing in learning in the hope that it would eventually bring the new knowledge and skills acquired on the course into the organisation on a permanent basis. Although driven more by the student trying to find a placement or the college trying to place a student the companies appear to align with Type 2 WBL. Only in the few instances where a foundation degree was built around the specific requirements of one company was there clear evidence of Type 4 WBL. However, in the discrete business community of Jersey it could be argued that by acting to support a foundation degree which benefits a particular sector, that sector could be viewed as a meta-organisation. By investing to improve the sector’s performance and competitiveness, i.e., Type 4 WBL, they were acting to enhance the position of the Island’s economy in the face of global competition.

The handbooks examined give little impression of what happens with respect to leadership in practice. Much of the content of the handbooks is devoted to processes that fall into the domain of management that controls what takes place in the conduct of placements. More indicative of leadership are the actions of academic staff involved in WBL. They exploit their personal contacts in industry to place their students, act as advocates for WBL in their institutions and promote the importance of WBL to businesses. Staff directly involved with students also articulated a role in exciting their students about the prospect of working in industry. The evidence gathered from colleges indicated that the leadership role in relation to WBL was, in the main, adopted by programme managers or HE managers. It was unclear whether this was a deliberate act of delegation by senior college managers or whether the programme and HE managers had taken up the task in the absence of guidance from senior managers.

The peripheral position occupied by WBL on many programmes relative to the academic content of the course was indicated by the use of vague learning outcomes intended to be able to cover as wide a range of work placement circumstances as possible, with learning evidenced by the production of reflective logs. Part of the problem was the desire to ensure that all students can achieve the same learning outcomes during WBL. As the students were inevitably in a wide variety of businesses for their placements this was very difficult to achieve without significant latitude being written into the learning outcomes. In such circumstances the role of the college should be to ensure that each student maximises their achievement of the learning outcomes but this requires far more contact and negotiation between the academic staff and the workplace supervisor. Underlying this was a lack of thorough market research at the planning stage to determine the precise form that the proposed foundation degree should take to meet the identified needs of a particular sector. This situation often arose because the foundation degrees had come into being as a result of the conversion of existing HND programmes without anticipating the full consequences of the difference in the two types of qualification.

The nature of the relationship between the academic institution and the employer was not uniquely clear. The HERDA-SW report, Bolden et al (2009), refers to the relationship in terms of partnership. In contrast, the CBI’s (2009) document lists focusing on the employer as the primary client. This dichotomy may reflect the respective positions of the organisations that commissioned the two reports. However, for academic institutions it does raise the fundamental issue of their
responsibilities in relation to their students. The CBI report also refers to having effective customer relationship management systems and explicit service standards. These are areas that Highlands College recognises as being underdeveloped but which have not prevented effective engagement with employers in relation to foundation degrees. These two factors are aspects of management rather than leadership. On the other hand, the need to communicate to employers what the college has to offer, and doing so effectively, is a component of leadership and Highlands’ approach has been particularly successful.

In the Jersey model time and resources had been allocated to enable regular face-to-face contact between the College and the organisations hosting WBL students to ensure understanding between the institutions. More importantly the face-to-face contact allowed the personal relationships to develop and be maintained which act as proxies for inter-institutional relationships and the conduit for leadership. It was clear from the interview data that mainland colleges were not currently devoting the same level of time and resource to contact with employers. It could be argued that geography plays a part in that all employers in Jersey are within a very small radius and focussed on a relatively narrow range of business activity, unlike south-west England, making it far easier to maintain contact.

Conclusions

WBL for foundation degree students is undergoing a phase of development driven by a number of external factors. The emphasis on employability skills for graduates from government and from employers is pushing colleges to take WBL more seriously. In doing so attention has become focussed on the learning aspect of WBL and how to support and assure it. Consequently there is a growing recognition that WBL is shifting to the central ground in foundation degrees. However the shift will mean that more time must be devoted to developing the relationships with key individuals in organisations that host placement students. This requires senior management in colleges and universities to recognise the need and play an active part in promoting WBL to the business community and supporting the efforts of programme managers, HE managers and departmental heads who do much of the one-to-one relationship building with industry. Devoting more time to building those relationships is not cheap. Establishing credibility with a business and being able to negotiate in detail a programme of activity that meets the subject specific learning objectives of the placement student usually requires subject specialists with knowledge of that particular business sector.

Jersey’s HE strategy was instrumental in focussing attention on the role of WBL learning in the College’s foundation degrees. In order that WBL gave students a chance to apply what they had learnt in College, generated new sector specific knowledge and skills, and developed employability knowledge and behaviour, it was necessary to approach curriculum design differently. By interpreting this to mean that WBL was the core of the curriculum from which the academic components hung, the College’s senior management were articulating a significantly different vision of the structure of foundation degrees. In turn, curriculum managers, exerting devolved leadership, devoted time to convincing some of the major employers on the Island to commit time and energy to WBL for the College’s students. Businesses needed to be
persuaded that pro-active participation might bring benefits in terms of:

- Influencing the content of the foundation degree to more nearly meet their company’s needs;
- Hosting students that are able to make a real contribution to their business;
- Reducing the long term risk associated with cold recruiting of graduates, i.e., those previously unknown to the company.

The success of this approach was dependent on academics ceding some control over their curriculum design to industry, but doing so with confidence because of the time and effort they had committed to the trust-building process inherent when leadership is a significant factor in a relationship.

This project has demonstrated that there are five relationships in WBL:

- The College supporting the student;
- The business supporting the student;
- The College providing the business with a service (explaining WBL, the benefits to the business, providing the student, monitoring progress and most importantly helping the business to support the student);
- The student providing input to the employer’s work tasks;
- The student seeking to achieve the learning outcomes required by the college.

In many colleges these five roles are grouped together and it is assumed that the college, the student and the business will somehow work in partnership to resolve any problems as they arise so that the WBL objectives are achieved. Breaking it down into the five elements clearly identifies the responsibilities and tasks. This is a different set of roles to those proposed by Bolden et al (2009).

**Recommendations**

1. Colleges should have an HE strategy that makes WBL the core of foundation degrees from which the academic part of the curriculum hangs.
2. Establish a leadership role for college staff that engenders stronger and more extensive relationships with business sectors and key individuals within organisations that could host placement students.
3. When new foundation degrees are being developed, or existing ones substantially revised, undertake thorough market research to find out what the relevant business sector wants in the qualification.
4. In return for the curriculum content required by the business sector, negotiate with individual companies to secure extended placements so that students can undertake work useful to the company which also enables them to achieve a range of subject specific learning outcomes.
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About the Authors

Edward Sallis is Principal and Chief Executive of Highlands College in Jersey. He is Visiting Professor at the University of Plymouth and until recently was a Trustee of the Centre of Excellence in Leadership. He holds a PhD in educational research and is the author of a number of books on educational leadership including Total Quality Management in Education Kogan Page 3rd edition 2003. He has participated in a wide range of practitioner research projects and is joint winner, with his colleague Peter Hubert, of the 2009 Learning and Skills Improvement (LSIS) Prize for Research that Impacted on the College’s Community. He is currently working on an LSIS funded project on Leadership for Work-based Learning. Edward was appointed an OBE in the 2010 New Years Honours List for his services to Education.

Peter Hubert is Head of Faculty of Art IT and Media at Highlands College in Jersey. He started in further education as a science lecturer from a background in mining, industrial energy efficiency and manufacturing industry. In the past Peter has undertaken research into metal matrix composites, and written papers on the recycling of coated roadstone. His MBA in educational management kindled a research interest in leadership which he has pursued through a series of CEL and LSIS supported practitioner research projects in collaboration with Professor Edward Sallis. During his time at Highlands College Peter has led the development of a foundation degree in art and design and been instrumental in establishing a research culture in the College.

Jim Pearce is Managing Director of Third Phase Ltd. After 15 years in the engineering industry he spent nearly 20 years at the University of Plymouth, initially as a lecturer in operations management and for the last eight years as Director of Enterprise. During that time he wrote a number of books and papers on project management and was an investigator on a large number of EPSCR, ESRC and EU funded projects. He is a chartered engineer and an experienced consultant and researcher in FE HE, the public sector and business organisations across the South West of England. His recent work has focused on improving access to HE and enhancing the links between business and FE / HE through WBL, science parks and programmes such as STEP, KTP.

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