

# The Introduction of Work-Based Learning to Higher Education in the UK

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Work-Based Learning (WBL) in higher education is a field of study established in the UK that has developed since the early 1990s. The term WBL was first coined in the USA although not initially in higher education. Notably the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) which aims to improve education-to-career pathways for adult learners promoted work-based experiential learning. WBL was then developed further in UK higher education institutions (HEIs), taking the learning to higher education level but keeping some of the principles from the USA CAEL model. Some key principles were basing learning in the individual's work environment, accessing and improving abilities, and reflecting on experiential learning.

The possibility for this development came when several universities across the UK were awarded a grant in 1992, from the then Department for Employment, to develop learning from work, in the curriculum. At Middlesex University it was called the 'Curriculum in the workplace' project and it took as the starting point, workers themselves rather than students going out into the workplace as part of their HEI course. It was the work of these projects, and the subsequent networking enabled by the Universities Association for Continuing Education (now known as Universities Association for Lifelong Learning), that launched WBL in higher education in the UK.

The 1992 government funding had the intention of providing a curriculum model for people working full time and studying part time and to form partnerships with organisations as well as students who worked part time or had placement opportunities. It started in some universities by using the model of 'Independent Learning Studies' (Osborne et al 1998) and Adult Learning. The development of university accreditation services supported the development of the WBL curriculum by providing the facility to recognise prior experiential learning (RPL) at the individual level but also learning from high level external courses e.g.,

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in-company programmes. The Learning from Experience Trust and Higher Education for Capability (HEC) movement informed the development of the WBL curriculum.

A transdisciplinary (TD) approach was taken by those universities who instituted WBL as a field in its own right. The ability afforded to those with experiential learning to gain university level credit through learning from work enabled many people to access higher education, many of whom were the first in their family to receive a university level award. WBL was soon taken up by many UK universities and the term WBL began to develop new meanings (see Definitions paper).

Middlesex University who had a leading role in establishing WBL in UK HEIs (Queens Anniversary Prize, 1996) and the University of Portsmouth both developed WBL centres and initially led developments in the WBL curriculum area introducing stand-alone awards in WBL. Middlesex was recognised with the award of a Queens Anniversary Prize for innovation and excellence in 1996, for this work. UK universities then also engaged with WBL programmes, for example, the Universities of Teesside, Glasgow Caledonian and Chester. These HEIs had whole programmes based on this approach whilst some universities chose to develop modules and other elements of WBL in their programmes. An example is the university of Lincoln and Humberside, now the university of Lincoln that had taken a similar approach but had a central unit for WBL that connected to subject discipline areas across the university where subject disciplines wanted elements of WBL to be part of their awards. More recently, since WBL means more than a curriculum designed for the workplace to meet the needs of workers studying part-time, the University of Warwick for example has developed WBL modules and other WBL features in almost every subject across the university.

### **Independent Study and Adult Learning**

Independent study can be thought of as a process, a method and a philosophy of education (Forster,1972; p ii). It has its pedagogical roots in Adult Learning (Freire 1972; Knowles, 1990; Mezirow 1991) which also had a significant influence on the development of WBL.

Independent study is a process, a method and a philosophy of education;

- in which a student acquires knowledge by his or her own efforts and develops the ability for inquiry and critical evaluation,
- it includes freedom of choice in determining those objectives, within the limits of a given project or program and with the aid of a faculty adviser,
- it requires freedom of process to carry out the objectives,
- it places increased educational responsibility on the student for the achieving of objectives and for the value of the goals

(Forster, 1972, p. ii)

Many of the universities that had taken part in the 1992 funded project developed an approach to knowledge in the field that drew upon and developed modules used by independent study – especially learning agreements and negotiated shell modules - and combined them with *Accreditation of Prior and Experiential Learning* (known as APEL, APL or RPL) and WBL project modules.

### **Experiential learning**

The WBL movement was greatly informed by the various approaches to RPL especially as it was informed by the *Learning from Experience Trust* which in turn had worked with the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) <http://www.cael.org/>. CAEL started in the USA, 1974 and used the term Prior Learning Assessment (PLA). In the UK the SEEC organisation <https://www.uall.ac.uk/public/networks/seec> is a network that has developed opportunities to provide mobility between and access to HEIs through the use of credit. The SEEC Credit Level Descriptors provide a detailed set of measurements for assessing levels of academic learning.

### **Capability**

The Higher Education for Capability (HEC) movement was popularised through the *Royal Society for Arts' Education for Capability* project. There was a growing need for professionals to move beyond discipline-specific expertise and engage with, what Schön (1987:3) terms, the "swampy lowland" of practice. The Capability journal is now archived with Advance HE. See the HEC archive; <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/higher-education-capability-archive-heca>

Lester's 2014 paper discusses the Capability approach as "*taking account of things that characterise the working environments of many professions such as emergent contexts, evolving and contested practices and the need for intelligent judgement and lived ethical practice*" p.7

### **Universities Association for Continuing Education**

In 1992, a new WBL network was set up with the then, Universities Association for Continuing Education (UACE) UACE later became the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) and the network changed its name to Work and Learning in order to incorporate the wider interests that universities had developed in relation to learning for, in and through work. The network has been convened by Middlesex University from the outset and remains a thriving network of UALL, <https://www.workandlearningnetwork.org/>

### **Transdisciplinarity**

Most work roles involve abilities that cut across the wider curriculum in higher education. Middlesex, Chester and Teesside are examples of universities that developed a pedagogical model of transdisciplinarity drawn from theorists such as Nicolescu, Gibbons and Nowotny.

Despite this happening at about the time of the *First World Congress of Transdisciplinarity* (1994) where the charter of transdisciplinarity was adopted, a transdisciplinary (TD) approach to curriculum was not well known or well understood. The TD curriculum model did not stem from the research movement in the first instance, it gradually developed as a curriculum area that took its areas of knowledge from work. Transdisciplinarity at that time was considered by the research councils as a contested concept. David Boud's chapter in the now classic book, *Work-based Learning: A New Higher Education?* (Boud and Solomon, 2001) brings to light the place of transdisciplinarity in WBL and discusses how assessing work-based learning would need a TD approach. Since then, more scholarly articles have made the case for transdisciplinarity and it is now a recognised term in many different fields but especially where curricular are related in some way to work situations.

Universities such as Glasgow Caledonian, Middlesex and Teesside have used the same TD approach to WBL whilst other colleagues across the UK, who run programmes of WBL, blend subject discipline areas with the more TD approaches of WBL in a variety of different ways.

The tendency for WBL to follow a TD curriculum has much in common with the ethos of the international TD research movement. However, WBL has developed a pedagogical approach in these instances rather than a purely research approach. The WBL direction in transdisciplinarity is not towards large scale research projects but as a pedagogy that supports the unity of knowledge in work situations (paid and unpaid) that lies both beyond disciplines and between and across the disciplines. The goal is the understanding of the present world in the context of work, of which one of the imperatives is the overarching unity of knowledge in work-related communities of practice. Examples of where WBL is defined and discussed as TD include Boud (2001), Gibbs and Costley (2006), Costley and Armsby (2006), Gibbs and Garnett (2007).

### **Curriculum Development**

WBL as a validated field of study is engaged heavily in curriculum and pedagogy and has award titles that span from Foundation level to Doctorate level and there are also possibilities for certificates of credit being gained by students that can have currency towards an award at the same or other institution. The Bachelors and Master in WBL that was developed in many universities across the UK was the basis for the development of the Doctor of Professional Studies in 1997, a highly successful transdisciplinary (TD) doctorate now practiced by universities across the UK. A TD approach to educational knowledge in work-based and professional studies is therefore now practiced at all higher education levels from Foundation to Doctorate. An early publication in the field (Portwood and Costley, 2000) set out the curriculum areas, modules and factors relating to a WBL curriculum. More recently, Helyer and Garnett, (2016) wrote a chapter explaining how WBL fits into higher education demonstrating the TD nature of WBL. A paper (Costley and Pizzolato 2017) discusses transdisciplinarity in the Doctor of Professional Studies.

WBL did not emerge from a subject discipline; rather, from the outset, it emerged and developed according to the needs of learners in work-situated settings. It did use methodologies drawn from the Social Sciences and Humanities to guide practitioners in

their approach to their practice-based projects. Methodologies have since broadened with a wide range of practitioner-researcher enquiry approaches with the 'Researching Professional' having become a familiar term.

The approaches to research used by academics engaged with the learning and teaching in WBL taught degrees and the Doctorate in Professional Studies, in relation to their own research, can vary according to the nature of the research being undertaken which could be curriculum development, pedagogical research, evaluative research, philosophical research etc. Academics who engage in pedagogical research, may be researching the underlying philosophies and theories supporting the curriculum area and/or policy-related research, in which case their research is not about developing a work-situated project and is not necessarily TD. This causes WBL to be unlike subject disciplines in this respect, where the academics are undertaking research interests that are in line with their research students. The WBL curriculum area does not bring about such a relationship.

The WBL movement led to further publications in more organisational learning and business areas but always had an 'education' focus with publications about WBL mainly being published in Education journals and submissions of scholars in the field being entered in the Research Excellence Framework (the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions) going into the Education unit of assessment. The WBL network continues to straddle these two more general areas in approaches to curriculum development and to research. In the UK WBL underpins much of the curriculum design for degree apprenticeships (Garnett 2020).

### **WBL in higher education partnerships**

With the influences of Independent Learning, Adult Learning, experiential learning (known as APEL, APL or RPL) and the Capability movement, the pioneers of WBL gained experience of working with organisations. They soon developed partnership models (Garnett 2001, Garnett et al 2001), that included accrediting company courses, developing learning agreements with organisations in every professional area and further development of work-based methodologies and work-based projects.

### **Summary**

WBL in higher education stems from developing a curriculum model for people in work contexts that has its roots in Independent Studies, experiential learning and the Capability movement in the 1990s. At that time, it was intended for people in work who were studying part time and for placements and other experiential work activities for full time students. The curriculum was designed to engage the work situation itself as a focus of the studies. Most models of WBL in higher education entail a pedagogical approach to both curriculum and research, are embedded in practice, and have been designed by educationalists whose main focus has been learning and teaching in higher education. Since the early 1990s the term WBL has been used in some countries including the UK to mean work experience of any kind including placements etc. but other terms have since been developed. This has led to a conflation of the terms used e.g., Work Integrated learning, Work-Related Learning to

mean the same thing. The knowledge and subsequent learning and teaching that takes place in work situations has become a key focus in most countries over the last 30 years and the developments in WBL have been significant in informing a whole range of work-related initiatives in HEIs. Many scholars recognise a TD situation in work environments. There is more scholarly work to do in explaining how subject discipline knowledge coupled with the more TD knowledge of work situations can be wholistically presented in programmes of study. WBL ideas have been incorporated into the employability agenda and the current focus upon graduate skills in relation to Bachelor's degrees. The more focussed aspect of WBL continues to develop the pedagogy and curriculum content that is appropriate for people learning for and from work.

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