

# Definitions of different forms of Work and Learning in Higher Education

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## **Context**

There is strong evidence that learning gained in, through and for work, whether it is through employment, voluntary, community, domestic or any other kind of work, helps to equip people with the capabilities that can improve their working lives, their employability and their life skills (Lester and Costley, 2010, Beehives, 2018, WEXHE, 2019). Learning in, through and for practice situations such as work can ease the transition from education to work and also enhance the current knowledge of those already in work, facilitating growth in a professional career. Work-Based Learning (WBL), a common term to define this can be designed for placements or other work experience for students in higher education (h.e.) taking initial awards or it can be for employees undertaking h.e. studies relevant to their work. Although a common term, there are many other terms in the area of work and learning which relate to the same or similar fields (see definitions below). This paper attempts to clarify this whole dynamic area.

As the broad area of Work and Learning has developed, there has been little acknowledgement of the potential for equity, diversity and inclusion. There is great capacity to access people who are backgrounds where they may be the first in their family where university attendance has not been the norm and for providing curricular that is demystifying for those from some ethnicities and working-class backgrounds.

What could be addressed more fully by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) is the finance arrangements, assessment processes, timings for study and assessments, and other university systems and processes all of which often need more flexibility for students learning in, through and for work.

The increasing presence of a 'Capability' approach in h.e. (Lester, 2014, Gervais, 2016) strengthens the cooperation between higher educational institutions (HEIs) and study programmes on the one hand, and professional practice on the other. It has been shown that developing capabilities (sometimes called competencies or skills) is most successful in changing realistic professional situations. Furthermore, the representatives of the world of work argue that h.e. should further develop curricular in work and learning by adjusting their programmes' learning outcomes to be more relevant to the requirements of employers and facilitate the development of lifelong learning.

There are different types of learning from work such as work placements, mentoring, internships, apprenticeships, etc. that have become an indispensable element in many h.e. study programmes. However, the definitions vary according to the Country, the institution and the field of study. 'Work-Based Learning' is a term which is often used interchangeably with other terms such as 'Work Integrated Learning', 'Work-Related Learning' and 'Work Applied Learning'. Nikolou-Walker (2017) posits "Despite the fact that WBL has been defined in several different ways by numerous commentators and authors, generally speaking it is still viewed as a worthwhile attempt at combining the workplace's knowledge with the knowledge gained while in higher education." Talbot (2017) considers that most of the different terms represent various pedagogic practices which have become a global phenomenon and "are an implicit recognition that the curriculum, if it cannot change, must adapt .... all involve some form of direct experiential learning in the workplace."

The fields of work and learning that are mediated through h.e. are part of an HEIs whole quality assurance agenda. As HEIs take on new and developing areas of the curriculum they

incorporate the same structures regarding peer review, current scholarship and appropriate processes and checks within administrative systems.

Quality measures in these fields should include how all stakeholders, such as employers, HEIs and students/trainees, fulfil the roles they take, in the continuity and sustainability of these three-party collaborations. Much of this is already a feature of HEIs through partnership programmes. Most universities have external partnerships but what is referred to here is a three-way partnership between the university, the student and an outside organisation that is usually affirmed by a learning contract or agreement.

## Definitions

A complex situation has developed regarding nomenclature in this broad field of work and learning and so this section starts with brief definitions that try and strike the essence of differences for comparative purposes. Fuller definitions and discussion then follow:

<b>Brief definitions of related fields in Work and Learning</b>
<p><b>Work-based learning:</b> First used in the UK to mean full time workers studying part-time in HEIs and using the learning gained at work to meet h.e. level requirements to gain an award (<a href="#">The Introduction of Work-Based Learning to Higher Education in the UK</a>). However, the term is now widely used to mean a range of learning activities connected with work.</p>
<p><b>Work integrated Learning:</b> This term is widely used in Australia to mean the placement, internship etc learning activities undertaken by students that are integrated into a subject discipline being studied. Learning outcomes gained through practice are designed to meet the subject requirements.</p>
<p><b>Workplace Learning:</b> How people learn at work is studied and researched. It is not often connected with college qualifications. An international conference features the research in this field- <a href="http://www.rwlconferences.org/">http://www.rwlconferences.org/</a></p>

**Work-related Learning:** "Planned activity that uses the context of work to develop knowledge, skills and understanding useful in work, including learning through the experience of work, learning about work and working practices and learning the skills for work" Quality and Curriculum Authority 2007.

**Workforce Development:** Perhaps the most evident of all the terms, this term applies to employed work. It sometimes appears that other terms are meant to have this meaning but are used less precisely.

**Apprenticeships in higher education:** HEIs facilitate learning aligned to employer defined apprenticeship standards which may also lead to a higher education award. The pathway for an apprentice to achieve the apprenticeship standard and the HEI award is a joint responsibility between the HEI and the employer.

Note:

1. The word 'work' includes all positive endeavour, paid or unpaid.
2. Work and Learning is usually meant to include all work and learning terms and activities.

## Discussion and issues around definitions

### Work-based learning (WBL)

In h.e. the initial use of the term WBL concerned professional learning that was structured through academic levels that includes reflection and research in work situations ([The Introduction of Work-Based Learning to Higher Education in the UK](#)). From the learning gained by mature part-time students through their work quickly became apparent as the kind of learning needed by undergraduates in their full time degree courses. The term wbl then started to be used for placement learning, part time work, sandwich courses and so on. A key point here is that the curriculum development and pedagogic skills gained by the university tutors had centred around transdisciplinary work situated abilities which were not always related closely to subject disciplines.

However, some academics did link such abilities to their subject disciplines and this was particularly prominent in Australia where they used the term Work Integrated Learning. Almost everywhere else, in the UK and throughout Europe, in Malaysia, the term WBL was

used to mean any of the learning associated with work experience whether it was related closely to a discipline or the more transdisciplinary model. The transdisciplinary aspect of WBL is a facet of the field that has been developed (Gibbs, 2015, Bravenboer and Workman, 2016, Garnett, 2016) and now features in much of the writing about WBL. The definition below, given by Garnett makes the point that work itself is a learning activity.

*Higher education level work-based learning (WBL) in the UK was developed from a range of employment department funded initiatives in the early 1990s. These initiatives were grounded in a policy context which valued graduate employability and sought to extend participation in higher education. The key feature of this WBL is that it focused on work (paid or unpaid) itself as a learning activity, rather than being just a placement activity for the knowledge of the academy to be put into practice. WBL explicitly recognises and fosters the recognition of the potential of the activity, context and purposes of work to develop high level knowledge and skills.*

Garnett 2020, p16

Garnett gives some background and points out that initial conceptions of WBL in h.e. came from the UK where it was developed through work-based knowledge that emanated from work itself, that is, its main focus was not to examine subject discipline areas and consider which elements of these could be learned through work experience thus meeting current learning outcomes. Rather than WBL drew upon the everyday, learning that arises from doing work. It is therefore often transdisciplinary in nature. Learning frameworks with generic learning outcomes were developed that enabled assessment of abilities/ capabilities learned in work settings using level criteria as a key element for assessment. This approach enabled abilities in learning that are emergent, embodied, reflexive and often tacit to be acknowledged.

Below, Talbot reinforces the point and makes direct comparison with disciplinary knowledge thus drawing a distinction. Using the term practice he engages with the personal. Practice theory offers theoretical underpinning to the whole field of work and learning.

*Work-based learning which is focussed upon the creation of practice knowledge .... aims to create personal knowledge not just for knowing but as the basis for practical actions. Paralleling developments in understanding of practice knowledge have been improved understandings of learning in the workplace.*

*As with the developments in understanding of knowledge, the picture which emerges is very different from the planned, uni-directional, didactic approach favoured by formal educational establishments. Learning occurs socially between individuals in highly specific (not universal) situations .... Much of it is unplanned, incidental and informal.... but it is also often structured and planned .... It also takes place over a considerable period of time so that it is progressive until a state of mastery is attained.*

Talbot 2019, p4

WBL curriculum development went in different directions according to individual providers and alongside developments in pedagogy. Nottingham (2016) researched into pedagogical matters in WBL and found three approaches: discipline-centred, learner-centred and employer-centred.

*...there are both commonalities and distinctive attributes across the range of practice that influence how academics develop and orient their pedagogy. It is argued that the characteristics and discursive features of these WBL perspectives present pedagogical approaches that could be adapted to inform more flexible mainstream provision.*

Nottingham 2016, p31

Nottingham's suggestion that these new approaches to pedagogy used in WBL could inform mainstream provision has taken some time to emerge, however it does appear that this is gradually happening. WBL providers identify and support flexible alternatives to conventional HE pedagogy, providing a student-centred approach (Walsh, 2008) that can now respond to more mainstream institutional initiatives such as employability and evidence of learning outcomes that meet the practice-oriented graduate skills agenda.

The conceptual framework for WBL, finds learning from practice; emergent, embodied, experiential and participative, co-constructed, situated and engaged (Lester and Costley 2010). Learning and teaching around these threshold concepts inevitably engages pedagogical practices that require a range of learning and teaching approaches (Boud and Costley, 2008).

The Interagency Group on Technical and Vocational Education and Training has the following all-encompassing definitions which constructs WBL with the more wholistic meaning that it has come to mean in many countries, organisations and education areas:

*'Work-Based Learning refers to all forms of learning that takes place in a real work environment. It provides individuals with the skills needed to successfully obtain and keep jobs and progress in their professional development.'*

IAG-TVET p2

### **Work integrated Learning (WIL)**

This term is widely used in Australia where WIL is a part of many university courses, mostly in more professionally oriented courses but also quite prevalent in a wide range of others across many different disciplines. Australia has a national strategy for WIL (ACEN, 2015) unlike many other countries and has developed national strategies, that although have differing interpretations between HEIs, has produced a developing literature on the subject that has enabled an ongoing development in the scholarly activity and thus development of WIL. What distinguishes WIL is its specific link to subject disciplines. This is the historic legacy of Australian higher education and in many ways is a link that is more convenient and attuned to current practices. There is no doubt that there is an earlier enablement for university courses to be more linked to work practices through WIL. What it might not do is take a completely new look at knowledge in practice. The following gives a definition of WIL from Australia that provides a clear description of what a well worked WIL approach can provide in HEIs in the current subject discipline formular

*Work integrated learning (WIL) is a curriculum design in which students spend time in professional, work, or other practice settings relevant to their degrees of study, and to their occupational futures. Students in WIL courses are encouraged by the specifically designed activities they engage in (e.g. reflective journaling; the creation*

*of a commercial product; the conduct of research; or other discipline- or profession appropriate means) to apply and learn disciplinary knowledge and skills in a real world context. WIL curricula can include such familiar notions as placements, internships, practical, supervised practice, and even simulations.*

*Importantly WIL is not the same as work experience or work-based learning, neither of which require students to specifically learn, apply or integrate canonical disciplinary knowledge.*

Smith, 2012, p34

### **Workplace Learning (WPL)**

Researchers in the field of workplace learning who generally research into how people learn at work have published research which many teachers in h.e. and pedagogical researchers have found useful. The wealth of research produced by workplace learning researchers has enabled teachers of h.e. students to develop curricular models and frame these models using work situations as a source of learning and thus constructing pedagogical strategies in facilitating their learning. The workplace learning researchers have also written in the area of EDI, for example see the international conference series for workplace learning, Researching Work and Learning (1999- 2019).

### **Organisational studies and other fields**

There is also an abundance of literature on work from organisational studies. and pedagogical researchers , management studies, sociology of work and so on. Government and cultural initiatives such as policy changes concerning equal pay, the class divide in creating opportunities, equal opportunities legislation, disabled rights, ageism, have also influenced the field of work and learning in h.e. These ongoing issues affect us all and whilst h.e. institutions (that also come under the same legislation and cultural changes) engage with organisations and communities outside of the sector, these issues will be pertinent in learning and teaching scenarios but we may argue, none more so than those who teach in the area of work and learning. This field of h.e. curriculum and pedagogy so engaged with organisations outside of h.e. has a unique focus upon Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI).

### **Higher Education for Capability (HEC) Movement**

in the 1990s, a Royal Society for the Arts (RSA) initiative sought to expand education from a perceived narrowly academic focus, popularised the term 'capability' (HECA archive).

It was applicable to the growing need for professionals to move beyond discipline-specific expertise and engage with what Schön terms the 'swampy lowland' of practice. Lester drew from this, widely stating that:

*.....a capability approach is able to inform and modify competence frameworks so that they represent something that better reflects professional work, 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. As a means of supporting professionalism and accountability, this would appear to be far preferable, more effective, and less bureaucratic than seeking to define competent practice through context-limited detail.*

Lester, 2014 p22

Lester's 2014 paper goes on to discuss the Capability movement and the ideas it had raised over many years. Stephenson, and Yorke's (1998) book provides thought provoking information that is still relevant today. The Capability journal is now archived with Advance HE.

### **Key Points**

Nomenclature can be challenging and often problematic. In the case of the whole field of Work and Learning it would seem even more important to 'explain your terms'. Terms are now more than ever decided in an arbitrary way, assumed and used interchangeably.

Pedagogical research that seeks for HEIs to develop more practice-based curricular may need to include an understanding that vocational education has held a lower intellectual status in the past. Historically, even dating back to Aristotle, theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge have been separated with much greater kudos given to theoretical knowledge. It may be argued that the separation of knowledges in our current culture and

practice is unhelpful. Surely there is higher-level learning engaged in practices that we need to engage with in higher education.

It is apparent that Workplace Learning has been on the university agenda for a long time now. Scholars in this field have a history of deep and meaningful research about adult learning and how people learn at work. Those more involved in courses of work related/integrated learning can relate extensively to this literature and often do draw from it. It has to be noted though, that as they do, many do not acknowledge that this valuable research does not apply directly to university-based courses. It is giving much constructive insight into how such credited activity can be realised but is not connected directly with it in most instances.

The mostly Australian and highly researched in-depth WIL approach is exceptionally helpful in the thinking around how the practice of work activities can be theorised and placed in curricular with specific learning outcomes in university courses. It is a compelling example of what is possible. It could be argued though, that whilst the emphasis is only on the subject-discipline focussed practical knowledge, some of the more transdisciplinary abilities that are indicative of practices may not be learned and assessed in curricula.

WBL in h.e., was greeted with scepticism in its early days which were in the early 1990's. The invocation of a transdisciplinary approach was equally greeted by the academy as a concept that was contested in the late 1990's and early 2000s. However now, with the changing culture of HEIs to be more responsive to employers, both WBL and transdisciplinarity have received a more positive reception by universities. They are also areas that policy makers round the world consider for current and future development in h.e.

Those of us that have been working in this broad area for some time, especially those of us in the Arts, Health and Education have sought to have the practice-based focus of our work

and learning recognised as higher education's capabilities. At the same time, it is acknowledged that in some curriculum areas practices, practice theory, practice-based curricula and pedagogy, the dynamic is not well represented in this burgeoning area.

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