

# Developing work-based learning for Library and Information Science

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## Abstract

**Purpose** - To disseminate information about the development of a work-based learning honours degree top up in Library and Information Sciences, focusing on the motivation for this development.

**Design/methodology/approach** - The context for the work is explained. The characteristics of work-based learning (WBL) are explored in terms of the relevance to LIS learning and teaching. The rationale for the development of the WBL top up is proposed and considerations that need to be borne in mind in the implementation are offered.

**Findings** - A synergy between the ethos of the existing approach to the education and development of LIS students at the University of the West of England and that of WBL was discovered.

**Practical implications** - There are implications for the training and development of teaching staff to engage fully and excel in a WBL approach, and for the institution to support this approach. There are also implications for advising employers and potential learners as to the benefits of WBL, and to ensure that it fits appropriately into the professional framework.

**Originality/value** - The value of the paper is in the sharing of an approach to developing a positive new way of working, how this fits with different government, local and professional agendas and the implications it has for all concerned.

**Keywords** Work-based learning; Library and Information Sciences

**Paper type** Case study

## Context

This paper outlines the development of a work-based learning (WBL) honours degree top up in Information Sciences at the University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE), and the motivation behind this. The Department for Business Innovation and Skills (2009) indicates that to attract greater diversity of students, more part-time study, more vocationally-based foundation degrees, more work-based study and more study whilst living at home must be made available (p. 3). The report goes on to say:

We will give priority to growing a diverse range of models of higher education....including options such as part-time and work-based courses aimed particularly at mature students or those from non-conventional backgrounds. (p. 6)

UWE has been involved in work-based learning for many years, led particularly strongly by colleagues in Health and Social Care where there are various work-based learning modules at different levels, for example, Evidencing Work-based Learning (level 6). The syllabus for this project module is determined by the learning contract which is agreed between the learner, their manager and the identified academic. The

learning approach is to be self-directed or team action focused, determined by a personal development plan and/or learning sets. The type of assessment is determined by a need identified from the learner's personal development plan and agreed via the learning contract, for example, a portfolio of evidence of the WBL opportunity supported by a 2,000 word reflective account of the learning achieved.

Recently, UWE's WBL policy has been reviewed and revised to reflect more accurately, and to encourage, new practices in WBL. Included in the agreed definition of learning through work is the following:

Its focus is on learning in and from workplaces, critical reflection in and on this learning, and its relevance to learners in terms of enhanced skills, knowledge and understanding and increased critical self-awareness and personal potential. Work-based learning is also highly relevant for employers in terms of enhanced employee and organisational performance, increased innovative capacity, employee contribution and output.

Since 2006, UWE has been running a Pathfinder project in the South West of England on behalf of the higher education institutions in the South West region (HERDA-SW). The outcome of the project is a "Shell Award Framework" (SAF) which is underpinned by UWE's credit framework and assessment regulations. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) funded these projects in response to the Leitch report (2006) with a view to extending the Train to Gain service to higher education. The aim is to enable employers in the region to source all their training and development needs through a single broker. Direct links will be promoted between higher education (HE) providers and employers to develop flexible workplace provision centred on the needs of employers and employees. The distinctive features of the SAF are:

- The acceptance of credit from other awarding bodies as a formal part of an Integrated Professional Development award.
- The offer to integrate short courses, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and experiential learning into a higher education qualification using the University's modular framework and assessment regulations.

The minimum requirement for anyone achieving one of these qualifications is a WBL module.

### **Where does Library and Information Science (LIS) fit in?**

For five years the University has offered an MSc Information and Library Management course (ILM). This is run jointly by academic staff who teach and research in the information systems discipline and by library practitioners, some of whom work in UWE's Library Services. The philosophy of the course is to integrate theory and practice by orienting the programme of studies toward practical experience which is something that Durrani and Smallwood (2008) claim is needed in librarianship courses (p. 671).

In the Quality Leaders' Project - Youth (QLP-Y), outlined by Durrani and Smallwood:

...the coursework ...aimed to connect theories and principles with their application in a real life situation (p. 683).

Certainly, the involvement of practitioners in UWE's MSc ILM has ensured a strong network of module leaders and guest speakers, many of whom employ students before, during and/or after they have completed the course, and who have considerable influence on the content and direction of the curriculum. When the course was revalidated by the University in the summer of 2009, there was a commendation from the panel about the efforts of the course team in engaging employers. This includes running an annual employers' fair and generally trying to ensure that work placements and projects are negotiated between students and employers to the mutual benefit of each.

As such, this exemplifies the activities suggested by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2009) that:

...businesses have a crucial role in the funding and design of programmes, in the sponsorship of students and in offering work placements and practical experience for students (p. 9).

Perhaps the approach to running the MSc ILM reflects the situation described by Moore (2007):

...the emergence of a new paradigm of organisational and personal learning, known as WBL ...has led to more partnerships, inter-professional and cross-organisational working between academia and practice to support workforce development (p. 162).

In a sense, the course had naturally taken on the philosophy of WBL.

Library Services at UWE is part of a wider network of university libraries in Bristol and Bath (Avon University Libraries in Co-operation - AULIC) whose staff development group facilitates explicit links between the students' dissertation research and practice. Each year they invite a number of students to address a group of librarians on the topics of their dissertations, thereby showcasing the professional skills of the students at the same time as bringing long standing library practitioners face to face with current topics of research.

Library Services staff at UWE are also part of a wider network of HE librarians in the South West who have responsibility for supporting disabled students (CLAUD, [www.bristol.ac.uk/claude/](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/claude/)). The CLAUD committee contributed to ideas for an inclusive curriculum when the course began at UWE and were pivotal to the development of a scenario-based group presentation assessment in one of the core modules.

One of the MSc ILM course team is a member of the South West Regional Library Services (SWRLS) council who take a keen interest in librarianship education in the region and provide a useful forum and sounding board for developments such as the work-based learning top up.

Keeping in line with this strong professional networking theme, it was an ex-student from the ILM, undertaking a project at the South West Lifelong Learning Network

(SWLLN), who contacted the ILM course team as the natural people to develop the top up to the foundation degrees in cultural services/libraries being developed within the South West. Indeed, this project was an ideal example of the government's commitment "to encouraging employers and universities to work together to develop more flexible ways of learning to meet economic and workforce development needs" (Durrant *et al.*, 2009, p. 10).

The final piece in the "context" jigsaw is that the Chartered Institution of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), the body that currently accredits LIS qualifications at universities around the country, and provides support for continuing professional development, has developed a Body of Professional Knowledge (BPK) that underpins this learning. Like the Knowledge and Skills Framework that has been introduced to cope with significant changes driven by health policies and to promote more work-based learning within healthcare (Moore, 2007, p. 161), the BPK is likely to facilitate and encourage more work-based learning amongst the LIS workforce.

### **Benefits of work-based learning**

Durrant *et al.* (2009) suggest that the combination of professional development of staff and the consequent organisational improvement is a win-win situation for employers and their staff undertaking work-based learning and go on to say that both organisational and cultural change is effected through work-based learning projects (p. 11). Moore (2007) indicates that, despite the need for many organisations to address change imposed by government agendas, many staff "may not want to let go of traditional working patterns to embrace different ways of working" (p. 165).

Durrani and Smallwood (2008) also suggest that a key aspect, in this respect, is "to manage resistance to change from middle managers and other staff". The way to do this, according to Moore (2007), is "to provide opportunities to discuss and interpret experience in order to construct meaning and new knowledge of practice" (p. 161). So, by encouraging their workforce to engage in WBL, senior managers can inculcate the culture of a "learning organisation" where staff are willing and able to learn from various experiences (Durrani and Smallwood, 2008, p. 687). As Moore (2007) suggests, "a learner undertaking professional education and training could experience the tide of change in both education and practice" (p. 162). Learning in the workplace is seen as a force for positive organisational change that can transform the organisation and those that work within it as an integral process.

Moore (2007) criticises the traditional paradigm of education in that it largely ignores the fact that learning has its roots in everyday activities and experience (p. 166) but equally Durrani and Smallwood acknowledge that:

...the academic aspect of work-based learning provides the space and time necessary for innovative thinking, reflection, discussion and exchange of ideas, often missing from a busy workplace (p. 676).

As such, WBL caters to a range of experiences and opportunities, harnessing what goes on at work and providing the scope for fully reflecting upon and learning from this.

As Durrani and Smallwood (2008) point out, wherever there are fundamental changes to the way in which services are provided, and with the creation of innovative new services, many of which libraries have been introducing over the past few years, library staff are requiring a skill set that they may not already possess and find hard to develop. As Lynch *et al.* (2006) indicate, “theory suggests the need for formal instruction but also an awareness of the situated aspects of learning” (p. 23). WBL is well placed to provide the latter. Further, as Siebert *et al.* (2009) suggest, people undertaking work-based learning not only learn from other people at work, but also learn through being a part of the “community of practice” of work-based learners at the academic institution:

By identifying similarities and differences in organisational practices, the students were able to apply the theory to practice, and to a certain extent they were able to validate the theory by analysing examples of practice from entirely different contexts (p. 449).

Both Durrani and Smallwood (2008) and Moore (2007) comment on the potential for work-based learning to inspire creativity. Moore (2007) suggests that it "engages the learner in problem solving and enhances the skills of inquiry, networking, change management and creativity" (p. 162), all of which are as pertinent to library and information science as they are to the healthcare workers who are the subject of her article. Durrani and Smallwood's assessment of where the QLP-Y was particularly strong was in "the generation of a vision and creative ideas as well as in developing methods of implementing these in a real workplace" (p. 687). This creativity is of benefit to staff at all levels within the workplace, and can certainly increase the confidence of staff who might previously have been reluctant to promote their ideas.

### **Developing the WBL top-up**

The SWLLN had spent considerable time and consultation encouraging the development of educational opportunities for cultural services (libraries, museums, galleries and archives) to meet the needs of a workforce in a region characterised by tourism and a certain amount of professional isolation. The University of Plymouth had developed a foundation degree in Libraries, Museums and Archives at Truro College. Bournemouth University had developed a foundation degree in Cultural Services, with a libraries and a museums pathway, that will run from Bournemouth and Poole College. As all foundation degrees are required to have a progression onto an honours degree, the University of Plymouth is offering an option to progress onto a BA (Hons) Education and Training and Bournemouth University a BSc (Hons) Heritage Conservation. SWLLN were keen that the students undertaking these foundation degrees should also have, as an option, a more library and information science focused top up.

In deciding which modules should be offered for an honours degree top up, the MSc ILM course team at UWE discussed a range of approaches. One approach was to consult with the local employers with whom the course team already has contact. Another was to elicit feedback from attendees of presentations done by members of the course team at local professional library group events. The idea of developing modules for a top up degree that would also meet the need of local employers for continuing professional development was also the most realistic course of action, given the likely small numbers progressing from foundation degrees in the early days

and the fact that at UWE the market has to be robust to justify the significant staff time in developing new programmes. In deciding which modules would be the most attractive we also took into account the perceived gaps in our Masters provision. As students can take 60 level 6 credit modules as part of their Masters, some students studying for the top up may decide to go onto the Masters and thereby take advantage of accreditation of prior learning (APL).

There has been some concern on the part of librarianship educators and library employers, in recent years, about the relevance of LIS courses to the skills needed within the current workplace. Durrani and Smallwood (2008) suggest that "professional training is likely either not to have addressed them or not to have addressed them sufficiently" (p. 674) and posit the view that the QLP-Y, making positive connections between academics and practitioners, "bridges the gap, providing the means by which staff can develop the skills that their employers require to deliver services in line with changing government requirements" (p. 675).

There is also a perceived lack of any significant input in LIS courses on the topic of information literacy (IL). As such, the LIMES Community of Practice (<http://www.ics.heacademy.ac.uk/limes/CONTENT/index.htm>) encouraged various librarians and library educators to bid to the Higher Education Academy - Information and Computer Sciences (HEA-ICS) for funding for projects to support the training of librarians to deal with library users in need of information literacy skills. Outcomes from this may be seen in the HEA-ICS conference proceedings in the form of the Beyond Google video (Chelin and De Saulles, 2009) and the Sir LernaLot project (Stubbings et al, 2009).

Owing to the emphasis on records and knowledge management identified in some of the larger companies with which the UWE information systems academics have connections, the idea of a module on Knowledge and Information Management was mooted and met with strong support.

Many of the younger librarians in the region mentioned new technologies as an idea for the basis of a new module. Their interest is particularly in learning about new (especially Web 2.0) technologies and how they might be applied effectively within different kinds of library and information services environments.

Thinking about our own staff development needs within UWE Library Services, modules on any or all of these topics would be attractive to many of our own library staff too, as one off professional development courses.

Naturally, the issue of the work-based learning element needed to be considered and so it was decided that one of the assessments in each of these modules could feature projects undertaken at work and recorded in a professional/personal development portfolio.

In addition to this it was decided that a project module, already successfully well established at level 6 on the undergraduate computing degree, would be adapted for use on the top up degree. As Durrant *et al.* (2009) point out, the value of work-based learning programmes for employers include real work projects and a focus on organisational challenges and processes (p. 11). Indeed, this module exemplifies, on a

smaller scale, the approach taken by the Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) schemes (<http://www.ktponline.org.uk/>). These enable organisations to acquire any particular expert knowledge they need through a project undertaken by a recently qualified person (called an Associate). Like WBL, a KTP involves a three way relationship between the organisation, the academic institution and the associate.

The final module will be a dissertation as this is an expectation of WBL honours degree top up programmes and demonstrates to future employers that the students have undertaken an in-depth piece of research and fully understand the various research methods employed for such a task. This is, of course, particularly important for those progressing into workplaces where support for research and development is paramount.

Generally speaking, the people who were consulted were in agreement that "there should be more bridges between further and higher education" (BIS, p. 4). The outcome of the consultations was that UWE should develop the following modules at level 6 to form a BSc (Hons) top up degree in Information Sciences:

- Knowledge and Information Management (20 credits)
- Web Technology for Information Management (20 credits)
- Information Literacy (20 credits)
- Dissertation (30 credits)
- Work-based Project (30 credits)

Modules to support librarians in the schools sector are also a consideration.

### **Looking ahead**

The documentation for the work-based learning honours degree top up has been produced and submitted to the faculty for consideration before (hopefully) being presented to the university for validation. It consists of the five modules outlined above, supported by our employer consultation and also by CILIP. If it comes to fruition, it will form part of the progression agreement for cultural services education that was drawn up by SWLLN that aims to identify the opportunities on offer to people in the cultural services sector in the South West of England and will provide a progression route from foundation degrees and onto the Masters, if appropriate. Either way, the WBL nature of the modules, whether taken as a coherent programme or individually as CPD, support CILIP's BPK and are fully in line with the ethos of reflection and development that are key to Certification and Chartership.

If the programme gets the go ahead, the course team still has a lot of work to do to develop the modules fully, to clarify the accreditation of prior learning processes, to establish learning contracts and to formulate the relationship of the individual modules to the wider Shell framework. It is also important to provide appropriate development for the tutors and mentors engaging in support for WBL. As Moore so rightly says "there needs to be support systems in place and the need for teachers to let go of the traditional paradigm and learn to facilitate learning with the new one" (2007, p. 166).

In view of the development of WBL across the curriculum at UWE, combined with the Shell framework, a new post has been funded to lead on policy and practice in WBL and to ensure appropriate staff development is in place as it is fully acknowledged that there are impacts on the learning for managers, mentors and academics engaged with WBL.

Colleagues in the Business School at UWE, at a recent work based learning conference, outlined their experience working with managers at local Primary Care Trusts. They described how they had to adapt their “facilitation” on an ongoing basis to take account of the personal and collective needs of the group (Jarvis, 2009). They highlighted how they were required to build a learning framework that accommodated the perceived tensions between action and reflection, the individual and the organisation, the theoretical and the practical, the conceptual and the experimental and the current level need versus the developmental need. Their experience meant they learned to be extremely flexible in approach, reviewing and revising the objectives as they went along, and doing so in collaboration with the learners.

Moore (2009), at the same conference, reported on a longitudinal evaluation of WBL where she, too, identified similar tensions. She also expressed concern about the weakness of support mechanisms for WBL, both within the learners’ own organisation, but particularly within the academic institution. Some managers are still sceptical about WBL and continue to sit on the fence. In such an environment it makes it more difficult for coaches and mentors to the learners in WBL situations to be responsible and self-engaging.

Staff involved in facilitating WBL have many aspects to consider. Siebert *et al.* (2009) make the point:

[The] effective design of a work-based learning programme should integrate different forms of learning, and different approaches to knowledge, and should encourage the students to participate in the practices of their community...and in their learning group within the university (p. 449). This requires considerable expertise, confidence and organisational support.

A further consideration is how a new WBL in LIS fits into the existing framework of LIS qualifications. The MLA has recently established a delivery task group to discuss the progression from apprenticeships and foundation degrees onto other qualifications and into the workplace. Part of the solution may be a diagrammatic framework to indicate what qualifications/experience are required for particular roles and jobs within different parts of the sector. A major step needed is to demystify the growing number of options for employers as much as for the workforce itself. It seems that demystification is also a requirement with regard to the notion of WBL so that both individuals and employers can see the true value of WBL and how it fits into their respective and combined development.

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