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Towards a Context-engaged Approach to Work-based Learning

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Abstract

Providers of tertiary education are involved in the 'employer engagement' agenda in many different ways and with a range of expectations from the learner, the employer and the education provider. The education sector has been criticised for its lack of understanding of employers' needs and for not providing employable graduates or an education experience that meets the requirements of the 21st century marketplace. In order to meet the market need it is essential to first identify that need and a methodology for its fulfilment.

This discussion paper explains the work being undertaken to develop a model to ensure that a work-based learning (WBL) curriculum is designed to meet the needs of the context for which it has been developed. This model identifies factors in both the external environment as well as the internal environment that can inform the WBL curriculum and builds on previous work by Garnett (2007) and Stewart (1997).

The paper explains the development of the model and its application within the context of the University of Wolverhampton, a post-1992 university in the UK Midlands.

Introduction

In the UK, the economic and political agenda is driving the WBL agenda. In their review of changing practices, Foster & Stephenson (1998, p.156) recognised the imperative for WBL to enable 'the UK to compete internationally in order to survive as an economic power'. The publication of the Lambert Report (2003) and the Leitch Report (2006) led to widespread changes in the perspectives and understanding of business–university collaborations and of higher education and skills in the workforce. More recently, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS, 2009) has identified the

need to widen routes to higher skills, promote more work-based study and 'empower universities to be world leaders in the growing market in transnational education based on e-learning' and equip 'Britain's workforce for a global economy' (p.40).

The post-Lambert and Leitch agendas have resulted in higher education institutions (HEIs) reviewing what they can do to meet the higher education learning needs of people already in work and how they can better engage with businesses. In addition, changes in funding – such as the withdrawal of funding for Equivalent and Lower Qualifications (Denham, 2007) – have meant that some HEIs are looking to expand their student numbers in new and unfamiliar areas.

These economic demands and need for institutional growth have created many opportunities and challenges for HEIs. One of the key challenges is the development of curricula and pedagogies to meet these demands. This article contends that a curriculum and pedagogy that are suitable for work-based learners will depend on the contexts in which the HEI is situated and that the starting point should be to develop an approach to work-based learning that engages with its environment: 'a context-engaged approach'.

What is work-based learning?

There is a range of understandings of, and consequently a range of definitions for, work-based learning (WBL). Foundation Degree Forward (2005) state that 'In general terms, work-based learning means any learning which derives from the experience of engaging in work' and that 'work-based learning can't be simply defined, for example, by the fact that it takes place in the workplace (since some forms of work don't strictly speaking have a workplace) nor can it be defined in more general terms as learning which is 'related to' or 'based in' work since it is the nature of the particular relationship between work and learning which is important.'

Levy *et al.* (1989, in Brennan & Little, 1996, p.3) defined WBL as 'linking learning to the work role'. The University of Leeds (1996, in Brennan & Little, 1996, p.3) identified it as 'being derived from the experience of undertaking work activities'.

In their report to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) on strategy for WBL, Brennan & Little (2006) noted that WBL is seen as a means by which to support the personal and professional development of students who are already in work and whose learning focus is upon their workplace activities. Nixon *et al.* (2006, p.2)

in their review of WBL, however, considered it as 'learning which accredits or extends the workplace skills and abilities of employees'.

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2007, pp.4-5) states that WBL 'is regarded as learning that is integral to a higher education programme and is usually achieved and demonstrated through engagement with a workplace environment, the assessment of reflective practice and the designation of appropriate learning outcomes'.

The University of the West of Scotland (2005) suggest WBL 'takes place when a student applies learning in a work setting, for which learning outcomes are identified, in the fulfilment of which the student is supported by appropriate teaching and guidance and credit is awarded.' A definition espoused by Garnett (2004) at the University of Middlesex, is 'a learning process which focuses university-level critical thinking upon work (paid or unpaid) in order to facilitate the recognition, acquisition and application of individual and collective knowledge, skills and abilities, to achieve specific outcomes of significance to the learner, their work and the university'.

In its consideration of a definition and understanding of WBL, this paper suggests that an HEI considers what it wants WBL to include. For instance, is placement learning, such as that experienced by the 'sandwich degree' student, included? Where does the workplace learning undertaken by a student on a full-time Foundation degree fit? Should part-time work to help finance studies be included? Foster & Stephenson (1998, p.162) suggested that WBL can also include 'technological transfer' through Teaching Company Schemes (a predecessor to Knowledge Transfer Partnerships, KTP). If an HEI is engaged with KTP does it want these to be included as WBL?

The definitions and understandings of WBL outlined above explicitly recognise the link between learning and work with some identifying the continuing personal and professional relationship between the learning and work. The definitions reflect the audience and purpose for which they are written. Some are directed at university curriculum designers and university staff, whereas others are aiming at politicians and maybe employers, and therefore have a different focus. Nixon *et al.* (2006) and the University of the West of Scotland (2005) both recognise the award of credit, whilst the QAA (2007) and the University of the West of Scotland (2005) include the need for learning outcomes to be written. The QAA definition includes the requirement to assess reflective practice.

An organisation's stakeholders should consider such different foci, understandings and definitions of WBL before it can identify its own understandings for its unique context. This paper contends that it is important that an organisation identifies its own understanding and definition for WBL and how it will incorporate WBL within its business. The actions taken and the definition adopted at the University of Wolverhampton are now considered.

Work-based learning at the University of Wolverhampton

A range of internal stakeholders were involved in a consultation that coincided with the review and updating of the University guidelines for work-based and placement learning following publication of the revised QAA Code of Practice, Section 9, in 2007. Discussions included the Pro Vice-Chancellor with responsibility for the academic portfolio, representatives from the quality and academic standards department and practitioners in work-based and placement learning from all subject areas within the University. The aim of the series of meetings was to discuss and agree what WBL should be recognised at higher education level; it could include both paid and unpaid work and should recognise the individual, the workplace and the University. Whilst the University could have developed its own definition it was agreed that an existing statement which met the stakeholders' requirements would be adopted. Having reviewed a range of definitions, the decision was made to adopt that of Garnett (2004) because this one identified the tripartite aspect of WBL (individual, university, employer), and referred to full- and part-time work and the importance of higher education level. It is this definition that underpins the strategic development and the design and delivery of work-based learning within this University.

Curriculum design in WBL

Traditional curriculum models follow a pedagogic approach where the teacher designs and leads learning, having first identified what it is the student needs to learn. The notion of andragogy, developed in the early 1970s, suggested a difference in the way that children and adults learn and led to an approach where the learner was more involved in the learning process – a move from teacher-centred to learner-centred curricula. Hase & Kenyon (2003, 2001, 2000) and Canning (2010) propose that a more appropriate approach for work-based learners is one of heutagogy (i.e. the 'study of self-determined learning' (Hase & Kenyon, 2003)) because 'a heutagogical approach recognises the need to be flexible in the learning where the teacher

provides resources but the learner designs the actual course he or she might take by negotiating the learning' (Hase & Kenyon, 2001, p.3).

Barnett *et al.* (2001) considered patterns of curricula design in a range of courses and identified three domains around which curricula are formed: knowledge, action and self. They found that relationships and weightings between these domains varied depending on the course being considered. In science and technology, 'knowledge' was seen to be the predominant domain whilst the 'self' domain was of minimal significance. In the arts and humanities, whilst 'knowledge' was still dominant, 'self' was of greater significance than 'action'. When they looked at work-based learning curricula design, they found that 'self' became the dominant domain, 'action' of secondary importance and 'knowledge' of least importance, although the three were more equally weighted than in the science and technology or arts and humanities curricula. The emphasis on the 'self' domain can be seen to reflect the importance of the individual in the design of the learning journey, and the similarity in weightings between the three domains suggests a more holistic approach to different aspects of the curriculum. The authors posit that 'attempts to develop curriculum strategies should take account of the patterns of curriculum components as they vary between the subject areas' (p.435).

The context-engaged model for curriculum design in WBL therefore needs to focus on the individual within his or her context. It needs to allow for the needs of the individual and the workplace, enable self-determined learning and also reflect the relative importance of action and knowledge.

The environmental contexts

Having identified what WBL is in the context of the organisation, and having highlighted the relevance of a heutagogic approach to curricula design, consideration is now given to those factors which create the context in which the curricula are set. Many readers will be familiar with the business model of STEP factors, where an organisation considers the social, technological, economic and political factors in its environments, and of SWOT analysis, where it considers strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats within the organisation (Coman & Ronen, 2009). For the purposes of developing the context-engaged model for WBL, it is useful to follow a similar model by considering the context from these external and internal environments.

Brennan & Little (2006) included a similar approach that considered enabling and inhibiting factors within institutional strategies for WBL,

as well as funding as a strategy for change.   In the international context, research by Brennan *et al.* (2006) identified similar external policy drivers to those in the UK, such as enhancing employability, opportunities for enhancing knowledge, increasing flexibility and greater learner involvement. Attention must also be given to the changing European environment and initiatives such as the European University/Business Forum and the impact of the Bologna Process (Schmidt & Gibbs, 2009).

External environments

In identifying relevant external environments that may impact on an organisation's approach to WBL, it is useful to separate the analysis into the macro and micro perspectives: the macro external environment will include the national and international contexts; the micro will be those which are within the local regional context.

It should also be noted that although the external environments may be common to all HEIs, they will have different relevance depending on factors such as the mission and the strategic direction of a university. Figure 1 shows key factors identified in the external environment of the University of Wolverhampton.

Figure 1: Context-engaged external environment
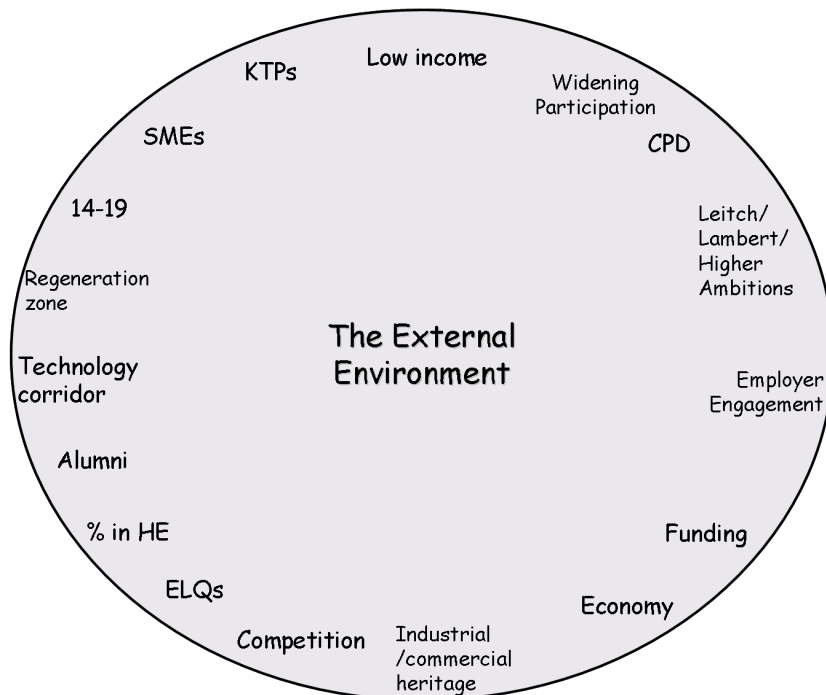
External macro environments

One of the primary drivers to engage, and to increase engagement with, work-based learners is the drive to meet the targets set in the Leitch Report (2006), which identified, *inter alia*, the need for 40% of the workforce to be educated to Level 4 and above of the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) (QAA, 2008). In order to achieve this, people who are already working will need to be 'upskilled'. Achieving the 'Leitch targets' has influenced the employer engagement agenda and has led to funding changes such as withdrawal of funding for Equivalent and Lower Qualifications (ELQs) (Denham, 2007). The loss of this ELQ income will have a variable impact on HEIs, depending on the proportion of their student population affected; the University of Wolverhampton will suffer a loss of income as a result of the ELQ funding changes, and this shortfall must be sought from alternative sources. A potential replacement source is through WBL.

The Lambert Report (2003) highlighted the importance of knowledge transfer between business and universities through such mechanisms as Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (KTP) for business-relevant research, and for business to have greater influence on university curricula. The University of Wolverhampton has been recognised for its success in KTPs; the networks and contacts developed can be part of a broader approach to employer engagement with opportunities for work-based and workplace learning through short-term partnerships, student placements, continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities and work-based learning in Foundation degrees.

Diplomas have been introduced into the secondary school curricula as an opportunity for more vocational learning to be recognised and accredited (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009). As students on these diplomas complete their secondary education they will seek a tertiary education that crosses the academic/vocational provision (i.e. supporting WBL). The longer-term approach to WBL will need to provide future opportunities for such learners.

A final major consideration is the impact that the changing demographic will have on the students of the future. The falling numbers currently in secondary education will start to impact on the availability of future students from the traditional markets (i.e. 18-20 year age groups). In addition, locally to Wolverhampton, fewer school and college leavers continue into higher education than in other regions, providing an alternative opportunity to engage with higher

education by offering work-based learning to counter the impact of the declining population.

External micro environments

Turning from the wider external environment, it is necessary to consider factors in the local environment that need to be considered in developing a context-engaged approach to WBL. Clearly these are likely to be inextricably linked to those in the external macro environment but there will be more variation between and within a particular region. As with the macro factors, the micro environment will impact on different HEIs' approach to WBL in different ways.

In the context of the University of Wolverhampton there is a significant level of local competition with other HEIs within 20, 30 and 50 miles radii, some of which have a similar mission towards engagement with employers, work-based learning and widening participation. Work-based learners have ready access to all these HEIs so the approach to WBL needs to take into account this competition and create a solution, or solutions, that will have more marketability than the competitors, one that offers something that they do not. Potential markets are also provided through Technology Corridors and economic regeneration zones (AWM, 2010), particularly where the HEI is already involved in the initiative.

The local micro environment is populated, predominately, by small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (i.e. those that have fewer than 250 employees) and includes many micro businesses with fewer than 10 employees. Many local businesses are involved in manufacturing and allied professions with a significant percentage with low level qualifications. Approximately 22,000 managers and leaders (58%) have no formal qualifications (West Midlands Regional Observatory, 2008). The regional industrial/commercial heritage will influence the perceived need for, and benefits of, higher education qualifications, and may present a greater local need for up-skilling and re-skilling than can be achieved through WBL.

The Midlands is an ethnically diverse region with a high proportion of potential learners who have no contacts in their family and social networks who have previously participated in higher education. In many instances they have a relatively low income as a result of low levels of academic attainment. There are many barriers to such individuals entering higher education as full-time or part-time students. A university that is committed to widening participation can support the inclusion of such learners in higher education through an appropriate approach to WBL.

Consideration might also be given to WBL provision in the CPD market for alumni, especially where this is not currently accessed to its full capacity. In recent years the University of Wolverhampton has invested in better management of graduate data to introduce alumni networks for both CPD and the identification of new learners. Catering for such a potentially large market, particularly one that has not been fully utilised in the past, can be a worthwhile constituent of an approach to WBL.

Internal environments

Factors in the internal environment that should be considered in developing a context-engaged approach to WBL have been subdivided into 'structural capital' and 'culture'. Structural capital has been defined as 'the organising and structural capability of the organisation expressed in formal instruments such as mission statements, policies, regulations, procedures, codes, functional business units, task groups, committees or less formal culture, networks and practices' (Stewart, 1997, in Garnett, 2007, p.21). The culture of a group has been defined as 'a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems' (Schein, 1993, pp.373-374).

Key aspects of the University of Wolverhampton's structural capital and the organisation's culture that may impact on its approach to WBL are identified in Figure 2 and discussed below.

Figure 2: Context-engaged internal environment
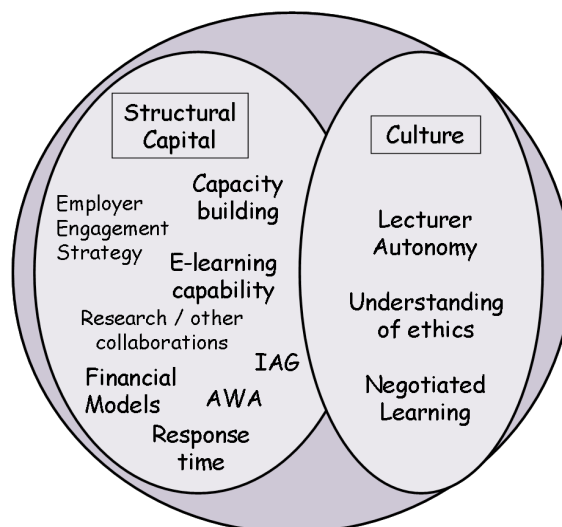
Structural capital

A key driver in the University's approach to WBL, insofar as its structural capital is concerned, is the Employer Engagement Strategy which supports the University's mission to be an educational hub supporting the economy through employment, entrepreneurship, creativity, knowledge transfer, research and development. A significant element of this strategy was the creation of a company to act as a broker between business and the University in the provision of continuing personal and professional development (CPPD) opportunities. Achievement of the CPPD company's objectives will have a significant impact on the University's approach to WBL.

There is widespread expertise in the provision of CPD through postgraduate study, bespoke provision and smaller pockets of expertise in WBL. In order to achieve the anticipated growth in WBL provision, however, there is a recognised need to build capacity in this area. Existing communities of practice within the organisation, such as the Work-based and Placement Learning Forum and established research collaborations, are ideal vehicles through which this growth can be achieved.

The University has a strong e-learning capability and has embedded technology-supported learning across the curricula through its blended learning strategy. The expertise that exists within this community, which already engages with learners in the workplace, can be used to inform and support WBL.

WBL requires a different method of academic engagement and support to traditional taught programmes. The existing academic contract, in which staff are deployed using an 'academic workload allocation' (AWA) model, was not designed for use with WBL. Negotiation with academics and their unions is needed to ensure parity in AWA across the different business areas of the organisation.

Likewise, the financial models for the more traditional face-to-face taught delivery do not apply to WBL and new models to ensure financial sustainability need to be developed. Existing information, advice and guidance (IAG) is written primarily for full-time taught courses with adaptations for part-time students. All IAG must be reviewed and, where necessary, rewritten for work-based learners, both in terms of content and the language that is used to ensure that it is fit for purpose in all contexts.

The QAA has reviewed its Code of Practice to ensure it supports ongoing developments in employer-responsive provision, such as through WBL (QAA, 2010). One area of quality assurance that has been modified at the University of Wolverhampton is the validation process to support the need for reduced response time to meet market needs and expectations.

Culture

It is generally recognised that academic freedom is an important aspect of higher education and that, within certain boundaries, lecturer autonomy is an essential component of the culture of an HEI. The approach to WBL should respect that autonomy and recognise that some (maybe many) academics will not want to be involved in the provision of WBL. Any strategy to introduce and grow WBL should build this into its plans for capacity building. One way in which the University of Wolverhampton is working to achieve this is by identifying those who are already involved in WBL to share and disseminate their practice with those who want to become involved. The point at which demand exceeds supply of these volunteers has not yet been reached and it is anticipated that academic capacity will continue to grow through staff development and raised awareness so that demand does not outstrip supply.

Negotiated learning is recognised as fundamental to the provision of WBL in determining, for instance, what the learner wants to learn, how they want to learn it and how their learning will be assessed. Negotiation does not normally form part of a traditional course and most academics are not familiar with how this is done. An important issue to address in approaching WBL is changing the culture and providing timely and relevant staff development and support to empower them to move towards this new learning.

Within the University of Wolverhampton it is also recognised that there will need to be a change in the academics' understanding of ethics to meet the changing environments in which they will be supporting their learners. For instance, what learners are asked to do by way of research and assessment will need to be cognisant of the fact they are likely to be investigating and reporting on a live organisation, not a case study example. Consideration will need to be given to issues such as confidentiality, access to detailed and accurate information and the role of the learner as a worker-researcher (Costley & Gibbs, 2006).

The context-engaged model

Drawing together the external macro and micro environments and the internal environments of structural capital and culture, a context-engaged model for the University of Wolverhampton can be derived (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Context-engaged model
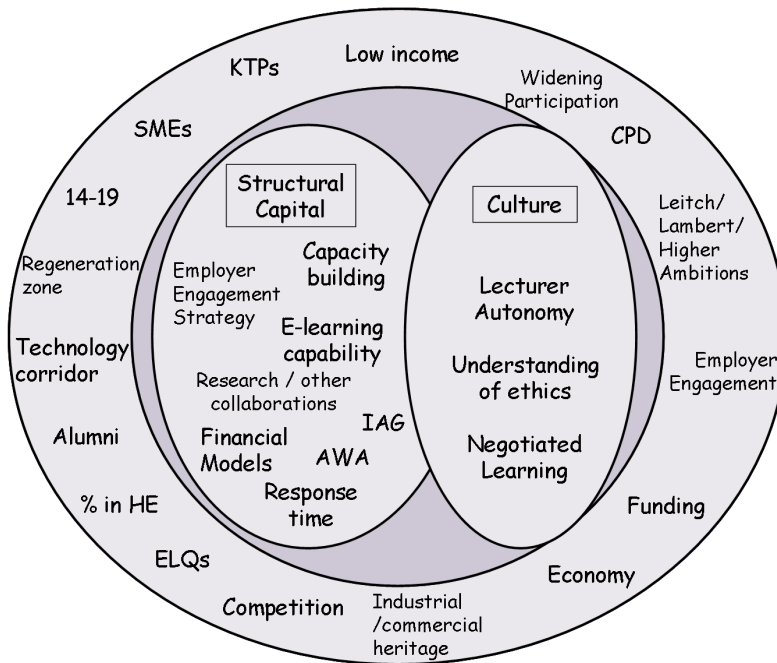
Any organisation that is developing their approach to WBL will find many commonalities between this and their own contexts but each must be tailored to suit what will be a unique solution depending on the relative importance of each in the context of their own institution.

Using the context-engaged model

The context-engaged model developed and described above has been used to inform the development of a WBL pedagogy at the University of Wolverhampton (Felce, 2010). Drawing on the STEP and SWOT analyses, a blended learning approach is being used to support an adapted pedagogy to enable negotiated solutions to meet learner needs whilst maintaining financial viability and sustainability.

The pedagogy is based within an e-portfolio so that it can be used for distance learning and allows flexibility in time and location of study.

Initial learning development is based on 5 credit units (50 hours of study) over ten-week periods, enabling learners to negotiate and construct individual programmes of study by building up a bespoke combination of study units. The 5 credit units are designed to meet SME performance needs, as identified through market research undertaken with local businesses. Academics are invited to be involved with the initiative based on either their subject expertise, or their interest in, and experience with, the e-portfolio. Based on the research being undertaken in the development of the pedagogy, the financial and workload allocation models are being adapted to meet the needs of this new business opportunity, although in the early stages of development, the pedagogy will allow learners to bring past and concurrent formal and informal learning into their e-portfolios to provide evidence of learning for accreditation. The University will be able to engage alumni in CPD through the pedagogy whether they remain in the local area or wherever they are in the world.

Through the use of an e-portfolio and 5 credit units of study, the pedagogy can easily and quickly be adapted to meet changing external and internal environments, particularly the needs of the learners and their employers.

Conclusions

This paper has proposed that curriculum design in WBL should take into account a range of factors that will determine the context in which it is delivered. Relevant aspects of the external and internal environments should be identified and their impact on WBL aspirations of the university considered. Each provider of WBL will have a unique view on the factors and a method of enabling curriculum development.

There are many aspects that will be common to all, such as government initiatives at local, regional and European levels, but each is likely to impact differently on the provider as they will be mediated by other factors such as internal structural capacity, demographics of the local workforce and predominant business sectors. The model developed has been informed by research undertaken by the author, some of which has included work undertaken within the University at strategic and operational levels. An outline of how the model is being used in the development of an e-portfolio based pedagogy has been given.

A context-engaged model can be used to inform the approach to WBL as well as the development of curricula to meet the identified

markets to ensure a viable and sustainable engagement with work-based learners. The model, and the pedagogies, should be revisited regularly to review the impact of changes and developments in both the external and internal environments, and to build these into the adopted approach to WBL.

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Alison Felce is based in the Institute for Learning Enhancement at the University of Wolverhampton and is the University's Coordinator of Work-based Learning. This post was created in Summer 2008 to develop the work-based learning strategy of the University, and to work with curriculum teams across the University in their collaboration with employers, to develop work-based learning programme models and delivery skills. Alison is a tutor on the Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education for new teachers in higher education. She is also the Project Director for a JISC-funded project to develop an e-portfolio based pedagogy for work-based learners in small to medium sized enterprises (ePPSME).

Alison's primary area of interest is in curricula models for work-based learning and the analysis of the learner experience through different models. She is developing cross-university collaboration and communication around work-based and placement learning, and chairs a higher education/further education network to share knowledge and experiences.