



# INTEGRATING EMPLOYERS IN EFFECTIVE SUPPORT FOR STUDENT WORK-BASED LEARNING (WBL) AN EVIDENCE BASE TO INFORM INNOVATIVE POLICY AND PRACTICE

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FINAL REPORT FOR THE HIGHER EDUCATION ACADEMY

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## **Executive Summary**

This report was commissioned by the HE Academy and produced by the University of Gloucestershire, in collaboration with Aston University. It is a timely analysis of the current activity between the higher education sector and employers. It responds to key current policy debates and identifies some current best practice, as well as making important suggestions for the future.

This project focused on exploring the employer support required for effective students' work-based learning (WBL), on developing guidance to employers, students and staff/HEIs. Through its methodology, it engaged with all these groups.

### *Key elements of the project*

The main elements of the project consisted of:

- a context-setting literature review;
- a survey of UK HEIs;
- focus groups with employers, HEI staff and students;
- a national expert seminar;
- development of digital stories to capture reflections; and finally
- the construction of a web-based guide for employers.

From this it can be seen that the project was far-reaching, thorough, and had clear practical outcomes.

For the purposes of this project, WBL is defined as encompassing a wide spectrum of activity concerned with student learning involving linkages with 'the workplace'. This includes where:

- a) The HEI places students in the workplace for project work that is integrated with the institution-based delivery;
- b) The students undertake a period of work with an employer, at an appropriate level and with appropriate briefing and support from their HEI;
- c) The HEI collaborates with the student's current employer for ways to build WBL practices into the workplace.

### *Principal outcomes*

The project aimed to produce the following principal outcomes:

- Development and evaluation of an evidence base with which to explore the extent of shared understandings amongst stakeholders of key factors in creating and sustaining successful active, reflective WBL environments;
- Development of an accessible innovative resource to guide employers, students and institutions on good practice in supporting effective employer engagement in active reflective WBL; and
- Development of recommendations to HE Academy for an Employer Entitlement Quality Kitemark for HEIs.

The work on digital stories and the web-based guide are innovative and initial findings show potential for wide ranging use. These two activities are currently undergoing further development.

The report's authors would like to flag up the interesting shift of emphasis in their perceptions which occurred during this work, and which they think is essential to the understanding of WBL relationships. This led to moving the focus of their recommendations from 'support of employers' to 'appropriate engagement'. This is summarised in the report as 'zones of engagement'. The report crucially found that relationships were of central importance and that there needs to be planning for appropriate engagement as the required support for employers comes through effective communication.

From this work, the report makes six key recommendations. These are:

3. The HE Academy should consider recommendations for an Employer Entitlement Quality Kitemark for HEIs. Employers are entitled to expect base-level provision in engagement to be decided collaboratively by HEI and employers. This should draw on a tool-box of nationally recognised good practice with provision that could then be tailored to different HEI/employer settings. The results from this project could form a starting point for such discussions.
4. HEIs should give more focused consideration to the development of clear consistent accessible WBL policies, which include good practice in employer engagement.
5. Institutions should review their WBL practices in the light of the practical employer engagement and support issues raised by this project. These include a focus on effective stakeholder engagement, managing expectations, ensuring communication and an exploration of value. Other key aspects include clear points of contact with employers; understanding employer needs; and encouraging interactions – both tutor visiting and inviting employers into the HEI.
6. Synergistic activities highlighted in the 'zones of engagement' should be identified and planned for strategically.
7. The HEI sector should work with employer groups to facilitate opportunities for employers to share good practice in how they support effective student WBL. This could be through employer networks but also through fora facilitated by Universities.
8. There should be accessible guidance for employers to support their role in WBL. The 'Web-based guide for employers' produced as an outcome of this project provides a starting point in this respect. The potential for the use of digital stories in relation to reflection on WBL should be further investigated through the contributions and reflections of those accessing the web site.

The report also identifies areas where further research will be required. The project concentrated mainly on two institutions. Further work is needed on the perceptions of WBL of a wider group of employers. More work also needs to go into looking at the issues related to employer engagement as these are very various, according to the type and sector of employer. Finally, there needs to be further research to explore and address employer support needs in WBL relationships.



# INTEGRATING EMPLOYERS IN EFFECTIVE SUPPORT FOR STUDENT WORK-BASED LEARNING (WBL): AN EVIDENCE BASE TO INFORM INNOVATIVE POLICY AND PRACTICE

## 1. Background

### 1.1 Introduction

Engagement between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and employers is a major emphasis of the *Leitch Report* (2007). The report highlights the necessity for partnerships between industry and higher education, to reflect '*a step change in liaison between employers and HEIs*'. Whilst a key aspect of Leitch relates to employer and HEI co-funded partnerships, this project contributes to critical thinking about the 'step change in liaison' through an exploration of how employers are supported by HEIs in facilitating work-based learning (WBL) and by developing resources for enhancing practice.

Research into WBL conducted at the University of Gloucestershire (U of G Thematic Review, 2007) confirms the view that WBL is a complex, contested term (Yorke, 2006; HEFCE, 2004, 2006; Brennan, 2005; Brennan and Little, 1996; Brennan *et al.*, 2006; QAA, 2007). There is, however, some consensus that WBL is critical for capacity building and developing sustainable co-learning communities beyond the University to support lifelong learning. The role of WBL is highlighted both in graduate skill development and in developing effective active learning environments. Moreland (2004), for example, argues that 'higher education programmes must progressively confront students with complex, in-the world activities that encourage reflection and risk assessment' (Little *et al.*, 2006, p3). Whilst HEI units are being established to promote employer engagement (e.g. London South Bank University; Glasgow Caledonian University – Scottish Centre for WBL), what is missing from the literature is a body of research which addresses *how support is provided by HEIs* for the critical role of the employer in facilitating the learning process.

WBL is construed as encompassing a broad spectrum of activity concerned with student learning involving linkages with 'the workplace', including WBL modes where:

- (a) The HEI places students in the workplace for project work that is integrated with institution-based delivery;
- (b) The student undertakes a period of work with an employer, at an appropriate level and with appropriate briefing and support from their HEI;
- (c) The HEI collaborates with the student's current employer for ways to build WBL practices into the workplace.

Whilst the project focuses primarily on the first and second WBL modes, the intention is that the findings can be applied to, and inform the development of, all modes of WBL.

## 1.2 Project aims

The project focuses on exploring the *employer support required* for effective active, reflective student learning in WBL environments and in developing guidance for employers, students and staff/HEIs. It aims:

- To maximise the value of students' WBL experiences by optimising opportunities for engaging in active reflective learning;
- To promote and develop shared understandings between employers and HEIs in the support of WBL students;
- To engage with employers to support their facilitation of appropriate WBL environments, introducing digital story telling as an 'employer development' medium.

### *Objectives:*

- To explore and evaluate innovative models of practice for engaging and developing the 'employer role' in effective WBL to promote student active, reflective learning in different WBL settings and disciplinary contexts;
- To identify and disseminate effective institutional policies and practices in engaging and developing the 'employer role' in providing successful, active, reflective WBL learning environments which support high-quality student learning;
- To produce a web-based guide on *Employer Support for Effective Active WBL* for all UK HEIs and employers including 'digital stories' of student, employer and HEI staff experiences of effective employer student support in creating successful active and reflective WBL environments.

## 1.3 Outcomes

Three principal outcomes are:

- Development and evaluation of an evidence base with which to explore the extent of shared understandings amongst stakeholders of key factors in creating and sustaining successful active, reflective WBL environments;
- Development of an accessible innovative resource to guide employers, students and institutions on good practice in supporting effective employer engagement in active reflective WBL;
- Development of recommendations to HE Academy for an Employer Entitlement Quality Kitemark for HEIs. The Kitemark would recognise that the university has in place clear processes for engaging with employers to enable them to support active reflective student learning in the work place.

These outcomes will contribute to enhancing student learning through:

- HEIs acting on the proposed innovative practice and establishing explicit processes for engagement between HEIs and employers to ensure effective student support for WBL;
- engagement with every UK HEI in the research process and dissemination of the web based guide;
- employer engagement through the research process and report circulation to HEI employer networks.

## 2. Methodology

The research design integrates analysis of evidence nested at macro-, meso- and micro-scales and is based on four stages, leading to the construction of digital stories and the web-based guide.

*Stage 1:* This stage contained a context-setting literature review, synthesising research and reports on HEI support for the employers' role in contributing to successful, active WBL environments to identify models of effective practice.

*Stage 2:* This stage involved a questionnaire survey of UK HEIs requesting information and examples of HEI guidelines for employer support in different WBL settings and different discipline areas. The survey was conducted using 'Questionmark', with responses being submitted electronically. Initial circulation was by letter to the Pro Vice-Chancellors of 139 HEIs. This was followed up by email contact to encourage response. Fifty-four completed questionnaires (39% response rate) were analysed to identify effective practice (see Appendices 2-4).

*Stage 3:* During this stage, six focus groups (six to eight participants; 70 minutes' duration) and three one-to-one telephone interviews with employers were undertaken at two case-study institutions (one city-located 'pre-1992' University 'A' and one rurally-located 'post-1992' University 'B') to identify different perspectives on support needs to enable employers to support students in WBL most effectively (see Appendices 5-6)<sup>1</sup>. It should be noted that the project was not a comparative study between the institutions, rather each provided sources of qualitative data which were analysed for the identification of key themes. Focus groups were drawn from:

- Students (at different levels and in different discipline areas) currently or recently engaged in WBL;
- Regional employers for both universities from different sectors, scales of enterprise, urban/rural settings and diversity of workforce who take students for WBL;
- HEI staff with responsibility for facilitating WBL in different discipline areas (e.g. placement managers).

Table 2.1 provides information on the focus groups and the one-to-one telephone interviews that were conducted at both universities:

*Table 2.1: Summary of focus groups*

| <i>University 'A'</i>   | <i>University 'B'</i>            |
|---|----------------------------------|
| Student Focus Group (two Groups)                                | Student Focus Group (one Group)  |
| Staff Focus Group (one Group)                                   | Staff Focus Group (one Group)    |
| One-to-one telephone interview with employer (three Interviews) | Employer Focus Group (one Group) |

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the two universities in the primary data collection part of the study, reference is made in the focus groups and interviews to a range of universities which are anonymised.

Key points about the focus groups are outlined below.

At University 'A':

- The student focus groups comprised current Foundation Degree students, students who were from different subjects and who have undertaken a compulsory work-placement, students who have undertaken voluntary work placements and also overseas placements.
- The HEI staff focus group comprised placement managers, careers advisors, and placement tutors.
- The employer interviews were all conducted with companies who take the one-year work placement students who study at the university's Business School. However these companies also have experience of a variety of other types of WBL activity.

At University 'B':

- The student focus group comprised students at different levels and in different discipline areas currently or recently engaged in WBL.
- The HEI staff focus groups comprised staff who have responsibility for facilitating WBL in a range of discipline areas *inter alia* Business, Public Relations, Teacher Education; Leisure, Tourism and Hospitality and Sports Management.
- In the employer focus group, the participants were from different sectors, and their organisations differed in relation to urban or rural settings and diversity of workforce. These companies were mainly involved in student placement activities with University 'B', although the lengths of the placement varied (from 2 weeks to 12 months).

The discussions with the student, employer and HEI staff groups addressed different aspects of the general theme of this research from their specific perspectives (see Appendix 5). The student focus groups considered effective practice in terms of employer support for their learning; the employer focus group and telephone interviews concentrated on support required by employers from HEIs to enable them to support students in WBL most effectively, as well as establishing employers' general needs in relation to WBL. The HEI staff focus groups identified the most effective ways employers can support WBL student learning.

*Stage 4:* A one-day National Expert Seminar focused on 'Support for employers in facilitating active learning environments'. This was held at the University of Gloucestershire in May 2008 and participants comprised 30 representatives drawn from HEIs and employers. The seminar critically explored the transferability of themes drawn from the focus groups in Stage 3 and contributed to the web-based guide.

### *Web-based guide for employers*

The foregoing methodological stages informed the construction of digital stories as part of a web-based guide for employers. Digital stories were used as a means of

capturing stakeholders' critical reflections on their WBL experiences and stimulating thinking about appropriate employer support for effective active WBL environments. Themes deriving from the focus groups informed the content of the digital stories. Devising the digital story approach drew on the digital story telling expertise at the University of Gloucestershire through research in its Centre for Active Learning (Jenkins and Lynch, 2006) and delivery of a HE Academy/JISC funded Pathfinder project on Digital Storytelling (Gravestock, 2008).

Digital story telling can be used in a variety of ways in reflective learning (see Gravestock, 2008). A digital 'story' in this sense is an interpretation of, or critical reflection on, what happens in a given situation. Our definition of a 'typical' digital story is a narrative of about 250-300 words (approximately two to three minutes in length) with between three and five still images that are used as enhancement. 'The simplicity of the process, and the fact that the technology required is fairly basic and easy to use, means that the focus is on the story rather than the technology' (Gravestock, 2008, p1). Digital stories can serve to develop the reflective process identified by Stroobants *et al.*, (2007, p1).

To promote a reflective process, the stream of actions and events, mostly undertaken in a busy and pressured environment, needs to be decoupled from the immediacy of the experience and viewed in a more summarised and static form.

### 3. Results

The first part of this section provides an outline literature review with the extended review being presented in Appendix 1. The second part presents results of the survey of HEIs and the third part presents key themes derived from analysis of the focus groups, interviews and national expert seminar. The results from these sources are discussed in Section 5 of the Report (Discussion and Conclusions) and provide an evidence base for the web-based guide designed to support employers in optimising student learning.

#### 3.1 Outline literature review

At a macro-level, it is argued that WBL is a powerful means of developing the acquisition of the higher order enquiry skills and capabilities demanded by the UK economy in an increasingly competitive, globalised environment (Leitch Report, 2007). There is a considerable literature on support for students in WBL (e.g. Cunningham *et al.*, 2004; Learning and Skills Development Agency, 2003, Mulholland *et al.*, 2006; Raelin, 1999). At the level of student experience, Boud and Solomon (2001) emphasise that effective WBL requires 'suitable' conditions, including effective partnerships between learners, employers and HEIs (see also Pilkington, 2004).

Research has explored issues of student employability through the curriculum and educational development (e.g. Yorke *et al.*, 2005; Yorke, 2006). Employers occupy a critical role in ensuring effective student support in successful active and reflective WBL environments (see Beaty, 2006 – expansion of HE 'embedded' in workforce development; 'getting employers as well as learners engaged with HE'). However, little research has been undertaken to identify best institutional practice in communication between institutions and employers to identify and ensure 'employer support' for the student learning experience in different WBL settings. These range from foundation to postgraduate levels and continuing professional development in different disciplinary contexts and employer settings. Communication problems experienced by different 'tribes' within academic institutions (Becher and Trowler, 2001) may be magnified between institutions and employers in seeking to develop mutually beneficial partnerships. As Fraser observes, members of different constituencies:

can share the discourse of their communities, each coming to recognise the ambiguities of their own taken for granted assumptions, values and understandings, thereby creating a new common language of the curriculum as well as a sense of shared purpose (Fraser, 2006, p6).

The extent of employer engagement in WBL may depend on various factors including organisational size (e.g. blue chip, SME), rural/urban setting, workforce diversity, approach to student involvement in the workplace and the character/culture of the disciplines and employment sectors involved. The employer role in supporting student learning extends through pre-WBL (including recruitment processes) to the actual WBL activity itself, potentially embracing varied models including facilitator, mentor and assessor. Anecdotal evidence pre-project suggested that HEIs provide a somewhat *ad hoc* range of support/ guidance (in terms of quality and scope) for employers in different WBL settings. This, together with varying levels of employer resources and enthusiasm for engaging explicitly with 'student learning', mitigates against a consistently high-quality student WBL experience. While there is an extensive literature addressing employer's requirements of graduates (see ESECT),

there is little focusing on how the employers can most effectively contribute to the creation of effective active, reflective WBL environments.

The strategic perspective on WBL and employer engagement is well represented in the literature (e.g. Bailey *et al.*, 2004; Wedgwood, 2004; Hughes, 2003; Haywood and Nixon, 2007; HEFCE 2008). However, far less is available on practical levels of WBL preparation/delivery (e.g. Glass *et al.*, 2002) and no models of effective practice on HEI support for the employers' role in contributing to successful, active WBL environments have been identified.

Table 3.1 presents (a) examples of specialist WBL units; (b) approaches to WBL; and (c) requirements for employer support identified in the literature. Further detail is supplied in the extended literature review (see Appendix 1). The literature confirms that there is a diverse range of employer engagement in HE, including provision that is employer-led (such as foundation degrees; see Engineering and Technology Board, 2007), employer-funded (usually through support for student fees), and employer-delivered (in the workplace). The literature focuses on WBL delivery in specific discipline contexts e.g. engineering (see Medhat, 2008; HE Academy Engineering Subject Centre, date unknown). In certain sectors – especially teaching, healthcare and social care, where the employer is a large public sector organisation – the employer's funding contributions to undergraduate programmes are a major investment in workforce development. In other sectors, however, employer funding of HE is considerably less (HEFCE, 2008).

Focusing more specifically on support for employer engagement, a number of key themes emerge from the literature such as those identified by Davies (2002):

- communication;
- placement preparation;
- perception of courses (HEI course leader, employers and students);
- the operating mechanism of pre-placement training;
- perceived effective communication between groups;
- the interaction of tutors, employers and students in the creation of any profile of competencies;
- employers' involvement in course design (meaningful feedback from employers) and employers' understanding about a course;
- employers taking an active and informed role in training and assessing students who are on placement; a need for training in assessment for tutor and work supervisors; marginal benefits for the employers due to the students lacking the necessary experience or knowledge of specific techniques, consequently requiring enhanced supervision;
- issues of discontinuity of work occurring on the arrival and departure of a student;
- resource implications of placement (well organised and resourced placement activity by teaching institutions).

It is important to note that the literature clearly reveals that the employers' perspectives on contributing to WBL are primarily commercial (HEFCE, 2008). They seek 'value for money' and a positive impact on their organisation's performance through WBL involvement. However, this perspective on 'value' is not always shared by all stakeholders in the WBL environment. In addition, employers seek flexibly and responsively delivered HE provision closely aligned with their needs (HEFCE 2008).

The literature reports a number of inhibitors towards development of effective engagement, identified by employers. These include: financial constraints (costs);



credibility (demonstrable value to employer and employee); time (its availability); student support in the workforce; lack of HEI flexibility and responsiveness (too slow, too static); complexity (complicated systems and bureaucracy), lack of relevance and outdated curricula. The lack of a common language and understanding has also been identified as a major issue. The benefit of employer engagement in WBL must be clearly articulated in the language of 'business' and clearly supported by an evidence base. Furthermore, employers' perceived outdated nature of the curriculum, the processes that support teaching and learning, and different and sometimes conflicting expectations all act as inhibitors. Finally, employers report that the unrelenting pressure of change means that they do not necessarily have time to create and sustain a stronger climate of learning in the organisation; they believe that HEIs could help with this (HEFCE, 2008).

The literature highlights several matters to be addressed by HEIs in being responsive to employers' needs. These include ensuring that Higher Education quality assurance systems are fit for purpose in the context of WBL. Employer-responsive provision must be funded appropriately. The value of vocational and work-based learning must be recognised and supported by providers. Academic staff may need opportunities to update and refresh their knowledge of industry and the world of work. Clearer routes for learners from non-traditional backgrounds to enter HE are needed, as are the academic credit and qualifications systems to enable learners to accumulate qualifications in a flexible way that fits with their work and broader life commitments (Wedgwood, 2004).

Nixon *et al.* (2006) highlight two key challenges in developing effective support for employers in WBL. Firstly, the language barrier must be overcome. To do this, it is critically important to establish a shared understanding of the area of focus from both an institution's and employer's perspective, irrespective of the terms used. This is the first step in establishing a common language. Secondly, engagement with employers must be effective. Building and sustaining longer term, closer relationships between HE and employers must underpin any drive by HEIs to expand their role in supporting workforce development. Nixon *et al.* (2006) argue that overcoming cultural differences and language barriers to establish a shared strategic intent will require substantial time, effort and investment on both sides. The foundation of this will be closer relationships between all stakeholders.

*Table 3.1: Summary of themes in the literature*

*(a) Examples of University WBL support and services*

HEIs fund units to provide centralised support for WBL and employer engagement activities e.g.

- Work-related Learning Service (Northumbria University)
- School of Flexible & Partnership Learning (Derby University)
- Centre for Work-based Learning Partnership (Middlesex University)
- The Employer Engagement Unit (London South Bank University)
- Scottish Centre for WBL (Glasgow Caledonian University)

*(b) Examples of approaches to WBL*

- Student placement
- Commercial and publicly funded WBL through higher education institutions and their business schools
- Commercial and publicly-funded WBL provided by further education colleges on their own or on employers' premises
- WBL in community settings, particularly learning funded directly or indirectly through public funding bodies
- WBL delivered by or through independent learning providers on a commercial basis
- Corporate training provided by companies in their own premises by their own staff or by external contractors.

*(c) Examples of employer support requirements for WBL*

- Staff development
- Development of ICT system
- Development of mentor guidance
- Support network and tutorial groups
- Production of teaching and learning resources
- Employer training offered by the universities
- Development of an employers' guide and website
- Development of WBL partnerships
- Reduction in the direct cost of programmes to employers
- Development of WBL projects designed to address the employer's needs
- Research undertaken by relevant Sector Skills Councils, and support for the internal validation process
- Build up of WBL provision by transferring the costs of designing and delivering solutions to the employer (and/or individual student) on a full cost recovery basis

## 3.2 Results from HEI Survey

As indicated in the methodology, a questionnaire survey was sent to every UK HEI to obtain information about, and examples of, HEI guidelines for employer support (see Appendix 2). The results from the institutional survey of WBL activity and support for employers in facilitating effective WBL environments are summarised below.

### 1. *Response rate*

Questionnaires were completed by 54 UK HEIs, representing a 39% response rate.

### 2. *Engagement in WBL*

Of the respondents, 54.7% considered that they were engaged in well developed WBL activity in a range of areas across the institution. Only 3.8% of the respondents thought that they are not at all engaged in WBL.

### 3. *Discipline-focused WBL*

Institutions provide a diverse range of work-based learning activities across a wide range of disciplines: the most frequently mentioned discipline areas are Artwork, Biological Sciences, Business, Chemistry, Computing, Creative Industries, Education, Engineering, Health and Safety, Health and Social Care, Law, Medicine, Occupational Health, Physiotherapy, Professional Health Sciences, Psychology, Science, Social Policy, Social Work, Sound Engineering, Teacher Education and Veterinary. .

### 4. *Models of WBL*

The main models of WBL identified by respondents were:

- Work experience and work placement in the undergraduate curriculum;
- Foundation degrees and other qualifications which are based in students' workplaces ('work-based studies degree');
- Industrial placements and sandwich degree in professional training programmes;
- Courses that are only offered in collaboration with the employer (students must already be employed and have the support of their employer to enrol on these courses, e.g. teacher and nurse courses);
- Individually negotiated programmes to support workforce development;
- Internships (undertaken in vacations and not currently a formal part of the degree programmes).

## 5. *Institutional policy on WBL*

Of the respondents, 41% indicated that their institutions have a policy on WBL while 43% said theirs did not. Other institutions are still in the process of developing an institutional policy in this area.

Where institutions do have a policy on WBL, it is frequently embedded within other policy and guidance documents whose primary focus is on either broader or more specific matters, for example:

- Institutional Strategic Plan
- Assessment Policy
- Learning, Teaching and Assessment Strategies
- Academic Quality Procedures
- Employability Strategy
- Foundation Degree Policy
- Placements Policy

WBL policy documentation came in a number of forms including:

- WBL handbook
- Quality Standards on Work-based and Placement Learning
- Foundation Degree Handbook and Guidelines
- Placements Guidelines

## 6. *Discipline-based policies*

Of the respondents' institutions, 39% have discipline-based policies on WBL. More than half of the respondents either do not know (17.8%) or do not have (35.7%) discipline based policies on WBL.

- Discipline areas reported a very wide range of practice from written policies or guides to custom and practice (which may be unwritten) or WBL and/or placement learning (which may take place in a workplace).
- It was reported by the respondents who have discipline-based policies on WBL that much operational detail of WBL is discipline-based and faculties are free to construct their own guidelines within the university's framework.
- In some institutions, all disciplines which include a work or experiential placement are required to publish policies and guidance on the delivery, organisation, and quality assurance of such activities.
- In some institutions, all disciplines are asked to address their approach to WBL, both as part of course validation and review and local plans within Departments.
- The policies for specific awards may be driven by professional registration/recognition requirements, which involve external accreditation, such as in Nursing, Teaching and Social Work.

## *7. Support for employers*

The provision of support for employers engaged in WBL was reported by 80% of the respondents with that employer support being provided in almost all the disciplines, including astronomy, biomedical sciences, business, chemistry, computing, education, engineering, fashion, geography and environmental studies, health sciences, law, music, psychology, social care and veterinary science. A number of inter-related themes emerged from analysing the types of employer support provided by HEIs. These themes, together with examples provided by respondents, are presented in Table 3.2, under the following headings:

- Information, guidelines and resources
- Partnerships
- Collaborative planning
- Synergistic activities
- Course related support.

## *8. Summary of key findings from the survey results*

Of the respondent HEIs, 55% considered that their engagement with WBL was 'well developed'. A diverse range of work-based learning activities was reported across a wide range of discipline areas. In terms of policies for WBL, 41% were at institutional level while 39% were discipline-based while 80% of respondents considered that they provided support for employers engaged in WBL. Employer support is provided in almost all the disciplines indicated earlier and took a variety of forms. Fifty-four completed questionnaires were analysed to identify effective practice (see Appendix 2). Examples of identified practice in employer support are being placed on the project's web guide for employers.

An important finding of the survey is that 20% of respondents indicated that their institutions do not provide support for employers. Further research would indicate whether this is more widespread in the sector. The survey finding reinforces the need for the additional guidance provided both by this project and for future work to be undertaken.

*Table 3.2: Summary of different forms of employer 'support' identified by the survey*

| <i>Theme</i>   | <i>Type of employer support</i>  |
|--|--|
| <i>Information, guidelines and resources:</i>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information gateways for students, 'industrial partners' and collaborating HEIs (various scales to national level)</li> <li>• Employer handbooks including general and discipline-specific or placement-specific guidance</li> <li>• Packages of information for employers</li> <li>• Briefing sessions</li> <li>• Guidance about expectations</li> <li>• Printed guidance and preparatory meetings</li> <li>• Employer access to resources such as the library or web site or careers centre placement office resource</li> <li>• Distance learning materials for employers</li> <li>• Model letters for employers</li> <li>• Certain administrative tasks undertaken by HEI administration (e.g. monitoring)</li> </ul> |
| <i>Partnerships: These are examples of well-established strategic partnerships</i>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HEI Partnership Manager supports employers</li> <li>• Websites specifically for employer partners with respect to working in partnership in delivering WBL</li> <li>• WBL partnership meetings</li> </ul>   |
| <i>Collaborative planning: This includes HEI provision of training support for employers</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employer mentor training and staff development by university</li> <li>• Professional development course for the employer's staff</li> <li>• Training of employer's training staff ; 'training the trainers'</li> <li>• Support offered directly to employer's staff related to academic skill development etc.</li> <li>• Formal training in supporting students in WBL</li> <li>• Individual and programmes of workshops for employers</li> </ul>  |
| <i>Synergistic activities:</i>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Academics working 'in practice'</li> <li>• Business Relations Unit which offers consultancy and knowledge transfer</li> </ul>   |
| <i>Course related support:</i>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HEI advice and other assistance with the design of learning opportunities and with assessment issues</li> <li>• Programmes designed to recognise experience-based learning in the workplace (e.g. Faculty of Lifelong Learning; Shell frameworks)</li> <li>• Disability ASSIST for placement involving disabled students.</li> <li>• Clear quality assurance procedures</li> <li>• Courses/seminars and subsidised CPD arrangements through GO Wales</li> <li>• Employer access to course and module leaders for discussion</li> </ul>  |

### 3.3 Results from focus groups, interviews and the expert seminar

Analysis of the focus groups, interviews and discussion at the expert seminar elicited six key themes. In the interests of clarity, these themes are presented discretely although they are clearly overlapping and symbiotically inter-related; for instance, a good relationship would imply good communication and shared expectations. The themes are presented below with illustrative quotations from employers, HEI staff and students and are summarised in tabular form at the end of the section. The six themes structure the digital stories in the web-based guide for employers.

In section 5, the implications of the themes in relation to enabling effective employer support for student learning are discussed together with points identified from the survey.

#### *Key Themes*

1. Effective employer engagement
2. Effective HEI engagement
3. Effective student engagement
4. Ensuring communication
5. Managing expectations
6. Exploring value

Perspectives on each of these themes of employers, students and HEI staff are presented below.

#### 3.3.1 Theme: Effective employer engagement

##### **A. Effective employer engagement: employer perspectives**

Effective employer engagement centred around their relationship with HEIs and course delivery and design. Employer perceptions of their engagement with HEIs are categorised in three areas presented in Table 3.3.

*Table 3.3: Effective employer engagement: employer perspectives*

- |  |
|--|
| (a) Establishing a relationship with the HEI<br>(b) Contribution to course design<br>(c) Contribution to course delivery and support of student learning |
|--|

##### **(a) Establishing a relationship with the HEI**

Employers emphasised the importance of establishing a good relationship with the HEI, department or an individual member of staff. Frequent mention was made of establishing a good relationship with the HEI careers service.

It's always ideal to have strong relationships built with specific departments although sometimes students wanting work placements in accountancy can come from different disciplines. Generally our pool is

drawn from students studying finance and maths and having a relationship with those departments is particularly important.

We expect, well we hope, that when we run events they'll be promoted widely by the Careers Service for us. We also hope that if a student comes to the Careers Service looking for a role in our organisation or in a similar organisation that they're given the broad spectrum of opportunities and not just pushed at one particular employer.

The relationship with the HEI should also have longevity.

... It's just work together more closely over time on my side and just inputting as much as we can into university practices as we are able to. It comes out of relationships.

Employers were interested in engaging more widely with HEIs beyond solely 'hosting' work-based learning students.

It would just be good to see what exactly it is (HEIs) are doing... it would be good to get a real insight into what you do and the sort of students you are working with and perhaps see how we can help you and you can help us to target those students that we are looking for.

## **(b) Contribution to course design**

The rationale for employer engagement in course design is to achieve the most from the placement for all parties, '*exchanging ideas for win-win learning objectives*'. An important contribution is ensuring that the course is up to date in reflecting what is happening in the business world. Employers emphasised the need to design courses which enable students to *reflect* on what they learn from their placements, link with theories they are taught at University and make connections. In so doing, they make links between what is learned at University and the knowledge and skills required in the workplace. Some employers aspired to be involved in curriculum design.

Engagement with course design with the university would be really good. We do some stuff already with e-skills.... So that's a big thing for us and any opportunity to get involved in something we think would be really helpful for us and the universities we'd be happy to investigate it.

Reference was made to employers being members of 'virtual' course advisory boards. Where courses do not have an explicit work experience element, employers still expressed willingness to be involved in designing courses to provide insights into employment beyond graduation.

What you're saying is that certain degree courses that have a work placement year. There are many obviously that do not and this is where you would like employers to come and give some view of the world of work and certain aspects could be business planning to help that student with that particular module.



### **(c) Contribution to course delivery and support of student learning**

Employer contributions to curriculum delivery took a variety of forms with employers identifying a range of ways of supporting students in WBL. Examples include: providing preparation before students go on placement in the form of presentations, workshops and specific programmes; assuming more responsibilities for student supervision on student placement; and helping the student to reflect on their placement experience and placement learning objectives. There was willingness among employers to be invited to the university, for example, as a specialist to talk to the students. Guest contributions on topics such as 'selling yourself' would enable students to make the most of what they have learned through part-time employment.

I've just done one actually at X and it was called "Selling Yourself" and I went in as an employer and we were talking about how they actually verbalise what they have achieved at part time opportunities etc.

Another example is employers contributing to interview skills workshops, giving students insights into careers searching – *'just what the interview could lead to and what students need to know to do it effectively'*. An additional emphasis was the importance of employer involvement in providing feedback to the students. Employers would also welcome more opportunities to be invited to the HEI to hear assessment presentations by the WBL students. Employers referred to their contribution to course delivery by being formal work-based mentors and through involvement in work placement assessments and appraisals.

I think it would be a positive thing from our point of view if we try to have that involvement, more hands on involvement in the courses.... I think that would probably be really beneficial in terms of our placement students.

Employers wanted to be engaged in agreeing student learning targets *after* WBL students had received feedback from tutors and peers from any formal assessment conducted at the University *during* the WBL experience. This would allow the employer to target their support for student learning to best effect.

I need to know exactly **where** to help the student. For example, they go back to the university give their mid term presentation and then afterwards I would want students to come back and tell me "this is where I think I'm at and these are where my gaps are and this is where I'd like some help. Can you help me?"

This would "keep us in the loop"..

### **B. Effective employer engagement: student perspectives**

The main aspect of employer engagement emphasised by students was the quality of supervision in the workplace. This was primarily perceived as the supervisor having sufficient time and interest to undertake the role. The other areas of employer engagement were receiving feedback and encouragement from employers and being allowed some autonomy, see Table 3.4.

*Table 3.4: Effective employer engagement: student perspectives*

- (a) Quality of supervision
- (b) Feedback
- (c) Supported autonomy

#### **(a) Quality of supervision**

Students considered that high quality supervision from the employer was vital and that the supervisor should have a clear role, and time and interest to do it effectively. This was particularly the case in relation to continuity where the student had more than one supervisor when, for example, they moved departments within an organisation.

I didn't really have a formal mechanism of someone there to support me... I had five different supervisors throughout the thing and the only reason I had a direct supervisor was because the university required that I had someone to support me and to report to. I think that otherwise I would have been lost in the system.

The trouble is the ones [supervisors] we've been given are too busy to be dealing with us as well as their own jobs....they've done the best that they can do but they have other things to do. This is the trouble, so you sometimes find yourself out on your own and not really knowing what you're doing by not really being able to speak to anyone else.

#### **(b) Feedback**

Students wanted employers to engage with them by providing timely feedback, both formally (through assessment and appraisal) and informally. Such feedback would optimise their learning – there was a sense of frustration when feedback came 'too late'. Students also wanted to have the appraisal and review/feedback entitlements of an established member of the employer's staff.

Everyone else is getting performance appraisals within the company but because I was a placement student I didn't seem to get that kind of review but I thought if I'm part of the organisation surely...It wasn't till like my last day that my manager said "you've done a great job during this year". Knowing that right at the end was great but think what else could I have done in that time if I was mentored properly?

When we got the placement hand book and it outlines these appraisals should happen sort of every three months and your employer's supposed to fill in this and give you feedback. I didn't have one... it would have been nice to have someone superior saying this is right, this is wrong or whatever.

As well as receiving informal feedback, students suggested that there was merit in employer feedback counting towards the formal WBL assessment grade.

...I do feel that integrating a little bit of your manager's feedback for maybe five percent of the mark would be good because your manager knows your work.

### **(c) Supported autonomy**

Students valued encouragement from employers, particularly in what is for them a new and unfamiliar environment. Where employers seemed to be too busy or preoccupied to engage with the students, students felt there could be times when they were expected '*to just get on with things*'. Whilst employers may wait and expect students to show initiative, the individual student may not yet have developed the confidence to be proactive.

You could just sit there all year and carry on printing out spreadsheets and making tea or coffee or doing photocopying and I know it's dependent on the company and what they'll let you do... Some of us seem to need a bit more encouragement though? And if you're not an assertive person you can just end up just photocopying for a year and then what are you going to write on your CV?

Students appreciated some autonomy, but within certain parameters.

I was responsible for managing my own time and my own caseload but I always had someone to refer to and there was always someone that I could show written work and they'd pick it apart and say "no that's wrong" or "that's good" and you know just having someone who was experienced. They weren't really closely following me the way that I imagined your mentors probably do but I could always get to them if I needed them.

I had the extra autonomy and responsibility by having a manager abroad but at the same time, it was sort of like OK. Am I allowed to do this... if I spend £10,000 on this budget, am I going to get in trouble? And yeah, it was good to have the experience but at the same time I didn't want to upset people. I wanted to be told "this is what you are allowed to do" kind of thing because I had no problem managing a big budget but I was worried that I would get in trouble and sort of like you know spend £30,000.

### **C. Effective employer engagement: HEI staff perspectives**

HEI staff perceived employer engagement to be demonstrated in a range of ways (see Table 3.5). Whilst they expressed some concerns about variability in quality of employer engagement, there was some acknowledgement that employers need support from HEIs to enable them to engage effectively with students.

...employers would sometimes like more guidance from us (the HEIs).

There was also recognition that some employer organisations had very limited resources.

...(small) organisations have fewer resources whether it's time, experience, people, money, to actually invest in working with HEIs.

*Table 3.5: Effective employer engagement: HEI staff perspectives*

- (a) Involvement in WBL courses
- (b) Access to potential future employees
- (c) Knowledge of students' prior learning
- (d) Ensuring students have appropriate skills and attributes for WBL
- (e) Student projects/work which has direct benefit for employer
- (f) Commitment and engagement of employer manager/supervisor with responsibility for students

#### **(a) Involvement in WBL courses**

HEI staff recognised the demands on employers' time in terms of their being involved in course development. An example of engaging employers' time effectively was through their membership of a virtual course advisory board. This meant that employers could make an input but did not have to spend time travelling to face-to-face meetings at the University.

They always feel that they are very involved in the course [through the board]. I've sent them over modules and things to look at and I ask them what they think they want. This means that when students go up to them, employers can take responsibility towards them and they understand what we [the HEI] are trying to get from the students and they understand that they have to take on some theory.

#### **(b) Access to potential future employees**

HEI staff thought that employers engage with the HEIs when they perceive recruitment opportunities.

A student on work placement or work experience is earmarked... "I think Jo is top drawer and I'd like to keep an eye on her, you know, for when she graduates". So that's how they see people coming through and they can grab them and they won't have to pay hefty recruitment fees.

#### **(c) Knowledge of students' learning**

Whilst HEI staff indicated that employer engagement is increased when they are aware of the capabilities of the WBL students, there was concern that some employers do not sufficiently utilise the existing knowledge and capabilities of students.

Some employers fund post graduate programmes at reasonable expense to the organisation and have extremely little interest in the sort of information the students are acquiring. There's often very little discussions with their line managers about what they've been doing in assignments, how the assignment or whatever might fit, might contribute to the organisation.

#### **(d) Ensuring students with appropriate skills and attributes for WBL**

HEI staff felt that when students are keen and well prepared in terms of generic, specialist and personal skills and attributes (e.g. attitude to work), this increases the likelihood of effective dialogue between the 'engaged' student and the 'engaged' employer.

Yes exactly (students must) have employability skills.

#### **(e) Student projects/work which has direct benefit for employer**

HEI staff consider that employers engage with students more effectively when the student's work, such as project work, is clearly well aligned with business requirements. In addition, staff perceived additional benefit when the student's core specialism is consonant with the needs of the organisation.

It is great when they do something that would actually help the employer (in their dissertation or project). We tried it with some of our students, some of our events management students... something that actually shows some benefit for the employer.

#### **(f) Commitment and engagement of employer manager/supervisor with responsibility for students**

HEI staff perceive employer engagement in terms of the quality and consistency of supervision provided for the student, across different areas of the organisation.

But we are working on the basis that (X employer) will make sure that the student is going to be well trained, well supported, well supervised, and well managed. ....Very few (students) are going to be managed by the same person. This brings into question issues of quality and the quality of the supporting supervision that the students are going to have.

Effective employer engagement and the nature of support needs articulated by employers, students and university staff reflect the importance of relationships as on-going partnerships between employers and HEIs. Such partnerships will only flourish if nurtured and actively maintained by the parties involved. The evidence suggests that there are many courses of action which would clearly contribute to promoting effective employer engagement. The challenge will be in orchestrating, within any particular WBL partnership, those activities best suited to the situation and putting the resources and processes into place to maintain their effectiveness.

.....

A strong message coming out of this theme is that employers wish to be involved in courses, in particular to help *prepare* students for their WBL experience. Students expressed the wish that the employers contribute timely *formative* feedback on their work. HEI staff recognise that employer engagement is both a cost and benefit to the employers and that it is important to optimise the latter.

### 3.3.2 Theme: Effective HEI engagement

#### A. Effective HEI Engagement: employer perspectives

Employer perception of the way HEIs engage with, and support, student learning is categorised in the three areas presented in Table 3.6.

*Table 3.6: Effective HEI Engagement: employer perspectives*

- (a) Criticism of HEI teaching of skills
- (b) A clearly defined role for HEI visiting tutors
- (c) HEI support for, and recognition of, employer role

##### (a) Criticism of HEI teaching of skills

There was some criticism of the way 'skills' are taught in higher education and students' preparedness for presenting themselves for work. This is important in terms of building up the students' confidence and in creating positive first impressions with employers.

I think the universities need to get a lot more specific about the objectives of what you want students to achieve. One of them has to be core skills and core competencies, at least developing some of them like critical thinking and all those other kind of things that are obviously "competencies".

I know a lot of universities run their own skills sessions but sometimes students don't do so well on their application forms because they aren't quite sure how to answer a question appropriately. Students need correct guidance on simple things like how to behave in an interview but if they've not done it before they perhaps come to interview and they aren't dressed appropriately or they lack confidence and they can't answer specific questions that we want from them.

##### (b) A clearly defined role of HEI visiting tutors

Employers seemed unsure about the role of HEI visiting tutors and whether it was sufficiently developed to support the student. They felt that the tutor visits should be a meaningful event and not just 'satisfying the regulations'.

We do get tutors who come and visit and they normally fill in a tick box feedback form and get some feedback from us but I think they could do more... to actually spend a bit more time with the people the students are working for and find out more... a lot of the time they spend about half an hour talking to you, the student and the manager and maybe one other person to get some feedback, then off to the next. I think that students worked for pretty much a whole year on our scheme. I think they could spend a bit more time to get more thorough feedback.

Sometimes employers thought that *they* were the ones being appraised.

...line managers often feel a lot of anxiety when the placement tutor comes to visit and they almost feel as if they are being scrutinised, their techniques, their management models are under the microscope. They take that position that they are under scrutiny.

### **(c) HEI support for, and recognition of, employer role**

Employers suggested that HEIs have a role in providing training for employers to enable them to support students, for example mentor training. It was also proposed that some form of HEI recognition would be appropriate.

How about recognition of employer success – e.g. Certificate of Achievement in relation to mentoring training?

A university prize or award for 'Best Placement Provider' would be good.

## **B. Effective HEI Engagement: student perspectives**

Students' views on the support provided by their HEI centred largely around the role of the 'visiting tutor'. They also expressed views about how else the HEI should support them.

*Table 3.7: Effective HEI Engagement: student perspectives*

- |   |
|---|
| (a) Role of the visiting tutor<br>(b) Other support provided by the HEI |
|---|

### **(a) Role of the HEI visiting tutor**

Visits from tutors came in for considerable criticism by students. A key student issue relates to how the visits are resourced.

...my placement was so far away and you are supposed to have one visit from your tutor in the time that you're there and they budgeted £200 for his flight and he emailed me back "Can't get there they gave me £200 and it's going to be £800"... .....being a mature student helped me but if I was twenty and in that situation I would have been terrified, I really would.

Students appreciated having a pre-existing relationship with the visiting tutor. When this did not happen, student experienced the lack of relationship and perceived lack of tutor interest.

I had two visits... but one was with somebody I didn't know so from my point of view saying there was a problem was made a lot more difficult by saying "You're a lecturer?"... the last one was better but it was two weeks before I left and just involved checking I'd done the learning outcomes...

There's no support from university tutor... as soon as you walked out of university in the second year that's it; they don't want anything more to do with you and until you come back to your final year.

In some cases, students were unsure what they should expect from their HEI placement office.

...you didn't get anything really from the university because the placement office didn't get involved in any way with my placement.

### **(b) Other support provided by the HEI**

Some students were concerned because they perceived that the HEI was unaware of the activities undertaken during WBL.

I don't think the university is quite aware what we are doing in the work placement..... They're sort of totally unaware of what we're doing in the work place as it seems from here. If you discuss with the lecturers they're not sort of aware of what we're actually getting on with on a day to day basis at work.

Students felt the HEI could assist students who might feel isolated by bringing them back into the HEI.

'The other placement student in my office from [named] University did have a day where they all went back and the university paid the travel expenses and they went back for the day to get together and worked on ideas for placement essay and essay writing skills, researching, and that kind of thing. I think that would have really improved my academic work.

There was a question of what exactly HEIs provide when the student is on WBL and what student entitlements are when engaged in WBL.

What are you paying your fees for in that year that you're away and you're paying half the amount of fees and you're getting nothing. I want to know where that money goes...nobody came to visit me (during my placement).

### **C. Effective HEI engagement: HEI staff perspectives**

Staff voiced some frustration about what support they should provide to employers. Interestingly they did not reflect on the support the HEI provides for students, except for some criticism about how other colleagues fulfil – or not – the role of visiting tutor.

...academic staff who have built into their (duties) to visit students cancel at short notice and then behave very poorly towards the student and the employer...on the other hand you've got very enthusiastic people but they're academics who haven't applied for a job in 30 years and they're telling a student how to do a CV... So you have to undo everything.

There were also concerns about resources.



*Table 3.8: HEI Engagement: HEI staff perspectives*

- (a) Providing appropriate support for employer (including role of the visiting tutor)  
(b) Resources

**(a) Providing appropriate support for employers**

HEI staff recognise that employers are busy and need information presented in a concise and accessible format.

These are professional managers dealing with new employees, many employees. And then there is requirement of paperwork they've got to sift through and the anxiety of not really knowing who's turning up, what the student is going to require of them, what the students are being evaluated on.

Some staff expressed frustration about knowing how to address the requirements of a diverse group of employers involved in WBL activities.

It's impossible to be able to please everybody all of the time...I did my annual survey and got about 400 responses back and some people love the support that we give to them. You know "best in class"; "you do a superb job, we really appreciate the tutor support briefing pack" etc. Then other people will say "there's not enough support". So there's almost a case then for saying therefore it needs to be tailored to the individual needs of every employer who recruits students into WBL situations and then once again where does our role start and end? Pre-placement – actual placement work – post placement element?

Staff welcome the opportunity for dialogue with employers to provide effective support for the student.

This is an open opportunity to exchange ideas and support the student but also to make sure you're getting the support you need from us. Is there anything we can do to assist you?

...we're here to support the student primarily and to make sure they are ticking the boxes they should be ticking and to be a safety net for you if there is anything you need.

The view was expressed that staff should be more innovative in the way that they provide information for employers. A number of innovative ways were proposed.

I think there are some common themes (about employer support) that perhaps we could address. I don't know whether perhaps by deploying some of the VLE expertise that we have in the university. This might involve creating some introductory videos, lectures that can be sent to the employer with some question and answers, identifying common themes.

I wonder if we could do more in that respect so they are getting the same provision of information but sugaring the pill in a much more approachable "You don't have to read this but here watch some DVDs".

Perhaps getting the students to prepare a pack for the next student and then give that pack on to the employers so they get to know some of the issues that these placement students are having because a lot of the time they just don't know.

Thursday lunchtime we invite employers in and give them copies of the assignments so they know what their students are doing.

## **(b) Resources**

Another concern of staff was ensuring sufficient resources in the HEI to support the students on WBL. The comments tended to refer to departmental or school provision without reference to the kinds of central provision provided by some institutional central units like Careers Centres.

We have a resources room at the [named] School which is great but it's... not big enough to cope with the demand of the students....there are very few resources which are readily available.

It's the problem of matching the key times when you need to see the student in work with my availability given all my teaching responsibilities. There is never enough time particularly when students are on placements some distance from the University and from where I live.

.....

A strong message comes out of this theme that HEI engagement needs to be resourced and planned to be longitudinal and sustainable. This needs to be enabled by means of effective information flows. This might mean person to person (tutor-student; tutor-employer) or more strategic approaches across different 'layers' of the HEI and the employers.

### **3.3.3 Theme: Effective student engagement**

#### **A. Effective student engagement: employer perspectives**

Some employers felt that students would engage more effectively with their assessed assignments if they were devised jointly by the HEI and the employer. Employers also spoke of the need to 'complete the loop' in relation to their role in promoting student engagement. An example is encouraging WBL students to feed back their experiences into the development of the course – and then for employers to know how the course had responded to this feedback.

Employers reiterated the point emphasised in discussions in other themes that they would welcome opportunities to engage with the students through being invited to the HEI. They also considered that HEIs should recognise more clearly that they, as employers, have responsibility to engage students. Employers thought that student engagement would be strengthened if HEI staff had greater knowledge and experience of employment outside higher education. They also felt that students should be encouraged to engage effectively with their HEI careers services. These perspectives are summarised in Table 3.9.

*Table 3.9: Effective student engagement: employer perspectives*

- (a) Employers and HEI devising assessments
- (b) Enabling student reflection and experiences to feed back into the course
- (c) Employers being invited to the HEI to engage students
- (d) Ensuring that HEI staff have greater knowledge of employment outside the HEI
- (e) Student engagement with careers services

**(a) Employers and HEI devising assessments**

Employers and HEI collaborating in devising assessment was seen as way of maximising student learning.

In their programme, they have at least two projects to deliver in the different departments they are working for. They will be assessed during the course of the year against what they've achieved against the competencies. I wouldn't have thought it would be that difficult for the university and the companies at the start of the placement to identify what it is you're looking for from the student at the end of however long the placement is, and just make sure the project or the assignments or whatever they have during that period would enable them to develop their skills and competencies.

**(b) Enabling student reflection and experiences and knowledge to feed back into the course**

Views were expressed that students needed to have time to reflect on what they had learned to enhance their own development.

There should be an integrated part of their lecture timetable; a session which is about reflection and about reflecting on what you've done to help you understand the skills that you've learned so you can market yourself and get the kind of graduate job that you are looking for.

Employers also felt that the student experience in the work setting should feed back into the course rather than 'just stay with the student'.

So then, they come with a lot of theories which their work-based placement actually disproves which is great. It's not a problem at all but then they've got no way of putting that back into the system.

(Named student) has gone back into her final year. She went through her placement here with you and partly here with me and she just disproved some of the things she's been taught in years one and two but actually it doesn't go anywhere. It's still being taught and there's no completion of that circle which I think is as important'

### **(c) Employers being invited to the HEI to engage students**

Despite expressed willingness, some employers found it difficult to contribute to 'get in front of students' in HEIs.

One of the things that my (name) company and all the clients I work with – one of the things they want to do is physically get in front of students...one of the constant frustrations we have is contacting the university and saying "we would like to come and be a guest lecturer. I'll send an engineer specialist from my organisation to come and talk to them". It's a nightmare. Employers find it really hard and they just get really frustrated and go away. They are crying out to get physically in front of the students.

I'll give you a really good example, we approached (named university) on behalf of an engineering company that we work for we want to go and do a guest lecture spot and we approached them four months ago and we've still got absolutely nowhere.

### **(d) Ensuring that HEI staff have greater knowledge of employment outside the HEI**

There was a feeling among employers that to engage students, HEI *staff* should have greater knowledge and experience of work outside higher education.

The more the university staff get off their backsides and out into the real world, one they will connect better with the students and engage them but two, they'll also find out what's going on at the sharp end. You know we've had these conversations around about before and it's kind of gratifying to hear that it's not just (named company) that's been left high and dry. The University is great at brokering initial conversations and establishing the need in the student's head to go out there and get some work-based experience. But, it does seem to be that they are left alone which is not necessarily all a bad thing because the process of commercial maturity is great, the personal maturity is great. That comes from actually standing on your own two feet but it does feel that they are a bit bereft generally.

Employers thought that HEI staff having greater knowledge and experience in work places outside higher education would enable them to provide more *direction* to employers and students.

There has to be some direction from university staff as to what exactly they want us to help the students to understand. Is it business planning? Is it, "what aspect of insurance would you want marketing"? Do you want them to go through each directorate? Do you want them to understand claims? Do you want them to understand operations? All those things, unless University staff understand us, they are not going to be able to direct the student.

### **(e) Student engagement with HEI Careers Service**

Employers made frequent reference to HEI careers services and emphasised the importance of students engaging with these services.

Perhaps if the careers service was able to read through their CVs and say this isn't what you should be putting. **This** is what an employer is looking for. We are always happy to give careers service access to the application forms that the students would have to fill out to apply to X firm.

### **B. Effective student engagement: student perspectives**

Students considered that their engagement with WBL would be enhanced if there was more integration between their learning 'on the course' and 'at work'. They thought this might be strengthened if the HEI tutors had some industrial experience. They felt students would be more engaged if they were able to provide effective input and feedback into course development. Students felt engaged when they were able to observe others and learn from them 'on the job'. In addition to these key points, reference was made to the need for appropriate learning support material such as key texts and provision of resources such as 'questions and answers' that they could refer to when they are off campus. Their perspectives are categorised in Table 3.10.

*Table 3.10: Effective student engagement: student perspectives*

- |   |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>(a) Integration of course-based and work-based learning</li><li>(b) Dedicated support in the workplace</li><li>(c) Opportunity to learn from others in the workplace</li><li>(d) Contribution to course development</li></ul> |
|---|

#### **(a) Integration between course-based and work-based learning**

Whilst matters related to communication and sharing expectations are considered elsewhere in this report as being of importance to students, it was evident that students were seeking clear integration between 'work' and 'course' based learning.

It would be better if there was a chance of doing the academic stuff which was more related to what we are actually doing when we're going back to the work place. When you actually go into your workplaces, you're not using the knowledge that you're trying to gain in the university so there's this barrier.'

The theory side of things seems to be slightly out of the league of what the company is doing.

The view was expressed that some HEI tutors were not very engaged with what students were doing in the work place.

I don't think the university is quite aware of what we are doing in the work placement. They seem very detached. I mean obviously it's fairly specialised compared to what you learn on your course... but they're sort of totally unaware of what we are doing in the work place. If you discuss

with any of the lecturers they're not, sort of, aware of what we're getting on with on a day to day basis.

### **(b) Dedicated support in the work place**

Students need to know there is some 'dedicated' support for them in the work place. Reference was made to the value of mentors and not having to rely on a member of staff who regarded it as an 'add on' responsibility.

We've got our own mentors as the single point of contact. The trouble is that the mentors we've been given are too busy dealing with us as well as doing their own jobs and that's not the mentor's fault. The time they have is very limited so by the time we've done all our placements and been to university, trying to hook up with these guys it's very difficult because they have their own working schedules that they have to fit us in.

### **(c) Opportunity to learn from others in the work place**

Students identified an aspect of their engagement as their observing, absorbing and reflecting upon what is occurring around them in the work place.

It's being around people and specialists and seeing what the managers are doing all the time so you pick up what they are doing well, in terms of managing things day to day...you might not be able to explain what it is but you just know and you've picked it up from your manager.

It makes it more concrete. It takes the theoretical stuff that you learn in the first and second year into practice...

...Watching how psychologists work and how they organise their work load is really useful for me in the final year to prioritise my tasks and work out how much time it's going to take me and to really plan stuff as I have a tendency to rush into things...

### **(d) Contribution to course development**

Ensuring student representatives feed into course development can be problematic with full-time university students; the problem can be exacerbated when the students on a course of study are based in a range of work places.

We don't sit down with the university people and the company people who are organising the course to say "this is what we think is good, this is what we think is bad". You have one representative who sits in on half a day's worth of meetings where the stuff is being decided, but it's behind closed doors.

## **C. Effective student engagement: HEI staff perspectives**

Staff highlighted three principal areas in relation to student engagement (Table 3.11).

*Table 3.11 Effective student engagement: staff perspectives*

- (a) Employer orientation
- (b) Enabling students to reflect
- (c) Setting appropriate assessment

### **(a) Employer orientation**

Staff emphasised that employers have a key role in engaging students, in particular the commitment of the company to WBL activity. However, they indicated that employers vary in their orientation to WBL students.

There's almost a split between the types of employers that we deal with in as much as you get two types. You get the type who thinks "this is a learning experience for the student, yes they get a good job and we pay them but we want the development of the individuals as well" and the other organisations where actually they think "well they're just sending students to do a job".

Staff considered that creating opportunities for dialogue with employers at the university or at the workplace encourages the former orientation.

Staff considered employer support for student engagement could be demonstrated by ensuring committed work-based mentors, the company doing its preparation for the placement, seeking prior knowledge of the student, and ensuring continuity of management. Staff felt that student engagement was encouraged by students doing 'real jobs' and having the opportunity to network and consider employment opportunities. In relation to the course design, staff thought that student engagement is encouraged through setting appropriate assessment which promotes reflective thinking.

### **(b) Enabling students to reflect**

Encouraging student engagement through reflection was emphasised by staff.

One of the key things we are thinking about is skills and I think reflective learning... needs to be in the first year.... as soon as they arrive we need to start reflective practice and that means looking at modules.

Students needed to be well prepared by the HEI staff to be able to reflect.

We [HEI staff] need to take more responsibility and be more innovative with the assessment regimes... Use some of these processes and introduce them early on so students don't get to the final year of study and go on placement and get this strange concept of reflection that they have to conjure out of thin air. If this was something that we integrated into all modules then I think it would be less of an alien concept.

HEI staff use strategies to enable students to share their reflections with others.

The week after they come back they stand up and present a five minutes four slide talk on what I got out of my time with this employer and what I

would do to improve you know just a little SWOT or something like that, that enables them to organise their thoughts on return. It's part of the programme so the first lecture on their way back – 12 people present for five minutes.

### **(c) Setting appropriate assessment**

HEI staff recognise the importance of assessment in promoting student engagement. The following quotation illustrates how a student may be enabled through the assessment task to engage more widely with the company; the assessment task provides 'permission'.

We set assignments that require the students to get out and around more in the organisation. Perhaps more than normally they have to ask questions of people that they may not usually ask questions. So they engage with that part of the organisation by finding out more about it and it encourages reflective practice.

Assessment is a key means of promoting reflection.

At the moment the reflective practice is written, it's put together as a real journal which is then submitted. What we are trying to do is tap into the students' virtual psyche and virtually communicating and doing things through the equivalent of social networks... it can be made online the reflective learning journal but elements you write about – about your skills, development, progression... can be shared with your tutor or whoever is supervising. You can share it with your manager...

As indicated above, assignments which require evidence of reflection were proposed by staff as an effective means of encouraging student engagement – to move from 'doing' to 'reflection'. Even seemingly unsatisfactory placements can provide fertile opportunity for reflection. Other forms of assessment which engage students – and employers – are 'live' projects; *'we try to do this with our events management students.'*

.....

In order to engage students, employers considered that they should have the opportunity to meet with students in the University as well as to help them reflect on their experiences. They thought that student engagement would be enhanced if HEI staff had greater knowledge of employment beyond education. Students clearly do not wish to work in 'two worlds' and seek close integration between learning in the University and in the workplace. HEI staff commented on the benefits of positive employer orientation to WBL and their own role in encouraging among students the skills of reflection.

### **3.3.4 Theme: Ensuring communication**

#### **A. Ensuring communication: employer perspectives**

Employers considered effective communication and close working relationships with the HEI about all aspects of the WBL to be crucial in helping promote mutual



understanding of all parties' needs. Employers require a variety of information about course objectives and what universities and students are expecting to achieve from the WBL. Their perceptions of the importance of communication with HEIs are categorised under the five headings presented in Table 3.12.

*Table 3.12: Ensuring communication: employer perspectives*

- (a) Clarity of person to contact in the HEI
- (b) Clarity of process between employer and HEI
- (c) Responsiveness from the HEI
- (d) Shared language
- (e) Information

#### **(a) Clarity of person to contact in the HEI**

Good employer support involves having a clearly named contact at the HEI to approach both about the WBL process and also if there are any problems.

It's knowing that there is a person to talk to sometimes. Some universities have a dedicated person who is purely responsible for managing that kind of thing, then others seem to have a lot of people but we get the same feedback about us. It works both ways. Just to have clarity about who is responsible who is the right person to talk to would be really helpful.

#### **(b) Clarity of communication process between employer and HEI**

The process of communication needs to be regular, systematic and formalised.

I would think a more regular more formal process for us to actually talk to each other as it's very ad hoc and it's usually down to me calling the university or them calling me if they need a question answered. But maybe have a regular checkpoint, even it's just once every two months just a quick half hour with that person to catch up about what's happening at our organisation or happening in yours and just talk through any things that have come up.

For some employers, communication problems are exacerbated when they have students from more than one higher education institution, where there may also be several contacts.

...If you're managing a load of different universities and you've got three contacts at each uni to have a formal structured half hour in the diary to have a quick chat would formalise it and get you talking a bit more.

#### **(c) Responsiveness from HEI**

Not all WBL activities run smoothly. Employers want a speedy resolution to any problems.

Knowing the fact that there's somebody there if we have a problem or an issue we can contact you and you react quite quickly. That's probably one of the most important things for me.

They also want a timely response to their offers to contribute.

I'll give you a really good example we approached [named university] on behalf of an engineering company that we work for we want to go and do a guest lecture spot and we approached them four months ago and we've still got absolutely nowhere ...(unheard comment)... ridiculous.

One of the things my company wants to do is physically get in front of students. If you invited them – and one of the constant frustrations we have is contacting the university and saying “we would like to come and be a guest lecturer I'll send an engineer specialist from my organisation to come and talk to them”. It's a nightmare for them. They find it really hard and they just get really frustrated and go away. They are crying out to get physically in front of the students so.

#### **(d) Shared language**

The need for a shared language was referred to throughout the focus groups and expert seminar and the lack of a shared language was seen as a potential barrier to effective communication. For example, it was queried by employers whether 'learning outcomes' – the language of HEIs – are the same as 'course objectives'.

#### **(e) Information**

Employers were concerned about lack of information related to a number of key matters such as:

- course aims and placement learning outcomes and how the two inter-relate;
- assessment schedules linked to the WBL activity;
- timetables;
- the required balance between study and work;
- information on modules which are most relevant to students' placement experiences.

They also needed clear information on what an individual student is capable of and what they have been taught so they can match the student to their needs. Employers want all this information in a format which is 'concise, simple and easy to understand'.

It would be useful to have some university-based information because I don't know where I would start to go for that kind of information.

If the University gets it right up front in terms of providing employers with concise comprehensive information about a student then actually it's going to work. You avoid so many problems and lack of clarity because employers are likely to get somebody who is going to meet their needs I think.

What I don't want is a twenty page document... it needs to be simple.

I need to get the information very clearly, very simply. Bullet points so it's not a big long guide book and it's easy to assimilate.

Employers also expressed interest in being provided with information on best practice from other organisations in supporting students' work-based learning.

## **B. Ensuring communication: student perspectives**

Frustration and feelings of disempowerment about perceived lack of communication permeated all of the student focus groups. Students' perception of the importance of communication is categorised under the two headings presented in Table 3.13, with lack of communication between the HEI and employer organisation being the main focus of concern.

*Table 3.13: Communication: student perspectives*

- |  |
|--|
| (a) Clarity of communication between employer and HEI<br>(b) Clarity of communication within the employer organisation |
|--|

### **(a) Clarity of communication process between employer and HEI**

Students expressed concern about the perceived lack of communication between the university and their employer. Whilst tutor visits are discussed elsewhere in this report, it is clear that for students they should occupy a valuable role in communication between the HEI and the employer.

...after about six or seven months they'd completely forgot that I was an undergraduate student, just a normal employee and I mean my tutor from university came up once during the Christmas closure so there was literally about three people in the office. He never got a chance to speak to my actual boss and it was very just kind of rushed and I couldn't show him everything that I was doing. I didn't feel that there was any value added to it and then when I was trying to write my placement essay and reports and stuff it was like a major time in the company ... There's no contact as far as I was aware between the university and my boss away from that single visit.

It was important for students to know there was clear communication between the university and employer, in relation to a range of matters. The following two examples relate to reviewing the student's progress and liaising about timetables.

...tutor came over and I was in contact with her on a regular basis for the first few months because it was sort of like I had about three bosses in five months...but I think having something like a review meeting with your placement tutor or someone from the university and your boss, just a short conference call where they don't have to come in, and the university has a set agenda to review what we want to achieve over the next few weeks.

...Between employer and the university, there doesn't seem to be too much communication going on ...

It seems weird because we have a timetable for work and a timetable for the university but it is almost as if the people who've written each of these timetables haven't actually sat down together and gone 'right here's what I've got on the timetable, what have you got?'. They've not done this at all so we're dotted around all over the place going to different areas of the company which in some aspects have no relation to the module you've done whatsoever. So it seems as if the university and the company aren't communicating at all.

Where communication was clear, it was appreciated by students.

...from day one, it was literally you were given all your objectives what you need to accomplish in the year...and then throughout the first few months it was like daily informal chats because we sat opposite each other. If I came across any problems they could be handled or sorted out straight away but within a couple of months I was literally finding work to do myself and taking my job in whichever direction I went because they gave me that flexibility.

When students are working abroad where the language is not English, effective communication is even more necessary.

Especially if students are doing it abroad and English is their second language or something and they try, I think, it (placement pack) got put in a drawer and forgotten about.

### **(b) Clarity of communication within the employer organisation**

Within the employer organisation, students need a clear point of management contact, particularly when changes in staffing take place during their placement.

...we didn't really have that point of contact; we were always chasing him [the manager] because the original manager left so we had very little contact at the company.

## **C. Ensuring communication: HEI staff perspectives**

HEI staff indicated a range of frustrations about communicating with employers including lack of opportunity to communicate, which was often a criticism of their own HEI, and a wish that employers would take up training opportunities offered by their HEI. HEI staff also experienced problems ensuring that information produced by the HEI reaches the right person in the employer organisation. Their perspectives are categorised in Table 3.14.

*Table 3.14: Ensuring communication: staff perspectives*

- (a) Opportunities to communicate with employers
- (b) Clarity of contact person in the employing organisation
- (c) Employers not taking advantage of communication and information provided by the HEI

#### **(a) Opportunities to communicate with employers**

Some staff felt that there were inadequate opportunities to interact with employers and establish longer-term relationships.

...I just don't feel I get enough contact with employers...

...it is interesting to talk to them (the employers) and find out what they are interested in as well.

#### **(b) Clarity of contact person in the employing organisation**

HEI staff indicated that there can be problems in trying to identify the appropriate employer contact.

We ask the student who is your line manager? Who is your line manager? Who's going to be supervising you everyday? What is their name? What's their job title? What's their email address? That's who we need to send the information pack to... There is the issue of line managers changing as well... In most organisations the person exiting would hand over to the person coming in and quite often handing over the information about the students' placement requirements is quite low on the priority list if it even features at all.

Other contact problems include identifying the correct person to whom to send the information pack.

The individual line manager has not seen the briefing pack because it's gone somewhere into the ether...

#### **(c) Employers not taking advantage of communication and information provided by the HEI**

Staff may provide information for employers but the format may not be appropriate to employers who want accessible information.

On the BSc (X course), they (employers) always complain that they don't get enough communication but they've got access to Web CT and things are regularly posted on the Web CT. They've got access to all the pages, including all the module pages, so they know all the learning outcomes of all the modules and they get a handbook right at the beginning. There's an electronic log book with all the competencies on that they can access, there's regular meetings of supervisors in all the departments, probably once a term they have a meeting. They are offered CPD opportunities

here for free if they are hosting a student. We seem to be offering quite a lot actually. The only thing we can't offer them is extra bodies in the department and that's the thing they seem to most need.

.....

All stakeholders emphasised that effective communication is required both in terms of the HEI supporting the employer and also between students and their HEI. There are questions about the format and length of information that is communicated to employers and to whom it should be communicated. Employers prefer concise, accessible, clearly communicated information. Booklets may be necessary, but they are not sufficient and need to be contextualised and supported through dialogue.

### 3.3.5 Theme: Managing expectations

#### A. Managing expectations: employer perspectives

Employers emphasised that for them to support student learning effectively, establishing and sharing clear expectations of the process for, and outcomes of, WBL is essential. Employer perceptions about expectations are categorised in Table 3.15.

*Table 3.15: Managing expectations: employer perspectives*

- |   |
|---|
| (a) Expectations of purpose<br>(b) Expectations of roles and responsibility |
|---|

#### (a) Expectations of purpose

Employers stressed the need to understand what it is the university and the student are trying to achieve – the *purpose* of the industrial placement or other work-based learning initiative.

Universities need to get a lot more specific about the objectives of what they want students to achieve, what the university is expecting to get out of it and about what the student should expect to get out of it – e.g. core skills and core competencies, critical thinking etc.

#### (b) Expectations of roles and responsibilities

Sharing expectations about roles and responsibilities was a key concern for employers. Worries were expressed about both duplication and 'gaps in relation to who was responsible for what' in terms of how students are being supported.

It's just about what the students want from us, what they (the university) want from us and what they can do on behalf of us.

## **B. Managing expectations: student perspectives**

Sub-themes under students' perceptions around expectations are outlined in Table 3.16. Students considered it to be crucial for employers to make clear to them at the outset what was expected of them and also for employers to understand the programme demands of their course of study.

*Table 3.16: Managing expectations: student perspectives*

- (a) Employers clarifying in advance their expectations of students
- (b) Employers ensuring expectations of students are appropriately shared across their organisation
- (c) Employer knowledge of expectations of the programme of study

### **(a) Employers clarifying in advance their expectations of students**

Although students are made aware by their HEI of the formal assessment requirements of the placement, they need to feel confident about what employers expect from them.

...if they (employers) could get representatives to come to each university and present to them to say this is what the placement year is about. This is what we want our students to get out of this and this is how you could help us meet our objectives, rather than just sending that booklet that never gets read.

### **(b) Employers ensuring expectations of students are appropriately shared across their organisation**

Students expressed the view that, particularly in large companies, whilst the 'overall' employer may have a clear understanding and expectation of what was planned for and expected of the student, this expectation was not necessarily communicated to staff in different areas within the organisation.

I was part of a scheme which had a three month placement where you moved around different departments and certainly one negative experience I had was turning up in the dept and nobody knowing I was due to be there... for someone early on in their degree course it was a very negative experience.

Some departments seem almost shocked at you turning up.

### **(c) Employer knowledge of expectations of the programme of study**

For students, it is vital that their employer was aware of the requirements of their programme of study, including how the WBL experience links to assessment. This could involve simple practical elements such as time entitlements to complete formal elements of the course.

My boss didn't even know we were allowed time off to do the essay – apparently we were allowed two days... I got an email from my tutor

saying I really need to see you, you are going to have two days and my boss didn't know anything about, and my boss said I had to take it out my annual leave when the university had put it in the booklet.

### **C. Managing expectations: staff perspectives**

HEIs need to help employers to understand what the university and students are trying to achieve. This implies that HEIs may need to be more specific about the learning objectives they want students to achieve from WBL, the value of WBL to all involved, and what all parties should expect to get out of the WBL activity.

HEI staff may need to do more to manage the expectations of everyone involved. Their perceptions about expectations are categorised in Table 3.17.

*Table 3.17: Managing expectations: HEI staff perspectives*

- (a) Guidance about the employer role in supporting the student
- (b) Guidance for students to manage their expectations of the placement

#### **(a) Guidance about the employer role in supporting the student**

HEI staff considered it important for employers to be aware of the demands of the entire course being undertaken by the student as a context for the work placement. In addition, staff are aware of the need to provide explicit guidance to employers about their role. This includes elements like the amount of contact between the student and employer, and what the student's entitlement might be in terms of employer support. This involves making it clear whether the employer has a formative role in the student's assessment.

....employers would sometimes like more guidance from us (the HEIs). I think they want to know what they're expected to do with students. They want to know what level of contact to have with them that sort of stuff...

Some of the common concerns, when you meet employers, are that a lot of the anxiety comes from something that we are all very experienced at dealing with which is managing student expectations.... I've had conversations with employers reassuring them that they have no obligation incumbent upon them to proof read and edit the placement report on behalf of the student.

I think employers want to know what they're expected to do with students. They want to know what level of contact to have with them that sort of stuff...perhaps we could specify that more closely and tie it in with the competencies framework that we have.

#### **(b) Guidance for students to manage their expectations of the placement**

Staff said that whilst 'generic' guidance for students is necessary to prepare them for placement, some discussion about the context of their specific placement is important to help to manage their expectations and to enable them to optimise their learning opportunities. This contextualisation might involve how they might be expected to develop during their WBL experience and how to maximise the benefits even if the WBL



experience has some major challenges or is not quite what was expected. Students need guidance on how to maximise their benefits from *any* WBL situation.

I think we are actually looking at providing students with the support depending on the type of employer they end up with. It's setting their expectations about what they should be getting out of their placement year, how they can grow in their placement year, even if their employer isn't best practice.

.....

The perceptions of each group emphasised the importance of clarifying the expectations of all stakeholders of the student WBL experience at the outset. Here HEIs have a key role and again there is value in a longitudinal relationship with employers. This increases the likelihood of shared expectations between HEI and employer and the probability that student expectations will be satisfied.

### 3.3.6 Theme: Exploring 'value'

#### A. Exploring 'value': employer perspectives

For employers, commercial considerations are critical in discussions about work-based learning. They make the point that they devote resources and time to help placement students.

(There is a) huge cost to organisations that in this day and age do not have huge spare capacity so everyone is stretched doing their day job to actually give up time to actually help placement students. It is a "big ask" whether it's small or large (employers).

It is also clear that employers value seeing students develop during the work-based learning experience. It is interesting to note that employers did not make reference to any overarching value of partnership with the HEI. Employer perspectives on value are categorised in Table 3.18.

*Table 3.18: Exploring 'Value': employer perspectives*

- |  |
|--|
| (a) Commercial value   |
| (b) 'Value' derived from contributing to student development |

#### (a) Commercial value

Many employers see engaging in WBL as a key investment in relation to their recruitment.

As we've got a graduate scheme as well, we hope to seed those WBL students into our graduate scheme if we can. So it really works as a feeder programme for that so that's the biggest thing we like to do. We have students for a year and then hopefully they come back.

Another aspect of commercial value is the work undertaken by the student.

‘They undertake specific projects for us.’

Also related to commercial value is the ‘fresh thinking’ that WBL students can bring to the employer.

... they do a really great job and they bring in some really good new ideas to people like me that have been doing this a few years – a fresh pair of eyes does a lot of good.

### **(b) ‘Value’ derived from contributing to student development**

Employers indicate satisfaction in bringing students on and increasing the students’ autonomy at work to enhance their employability.

The main thing for us – the students come in pretty new to the world of work and you see by the end of the year how they’ve actually progressed and gained in confidence, communication skills and it just makes them so much more employable.

In their final year, they’ve clocked why we do it - they still have difficulties and issues with their groups but they understand why we’re trying to get them to understand how to organise a group and how to solve those problems. At first they seem to think the university should solve them for them and in the work place somebody will be there to solve their problems as well.

## **B. Exploring ‘value’: student perspectives**

Student perspectives on the value of work-based learning (see Table 3.19) were overwhelmingly positive both in terms of their learning development and personal capital for employability. There were some concerns that its value to their learning was not sufficiently recognised in the course assessments.

*Table 3.19: Exploring ‘value’: student perspectives*

- (a) ‘Value’ as learning development
- (b) ‘Value’ for future employment
- (c) ‘Value’ to be reflected in course assessments
- (d) ‘Value’ for the employer

### **(a) ‘Value’ as learning development**

Students valued the opportunity to apply and test knowledge and skills learnt during the University-based part of their degree.

For me it was just being given the opportunity to put into practice the stuff that you learn on your degree and just having the opportunity to work...

The impact on your learning as well... I’ve learnt more this year than I’ve done over the whole of the first two years... the clarity of things, it’s just a lot clearer. I’ve actually felt like I’ve learnt it and not just been assessed...

I feel like I understand it completely. I think if I hadn't gone on placement... I might have done ok but not understood it to the level I do now.

Students need support in recognising the skills they have learnt both formally and informally.

... In (x discipline) you don't get any credits for doing the placement you do it for yourself for whatever reason, but they should make it clear. You should be encouraged to use your initiative although you might not get accreditation for it in an academic official way. But just be encouraged to make the most of your placement and you should value the skills that you've picked up and they should be acknowledged. But unless people are encouraged to do that it might not happen and that's the role of the placement tutor again to try and encourage you to do that.

### **(b) 'Value' for future employment**

Students value WBL as a means of enhancing their future employment.

...I have been doing a year long module... and that's been really good and it's worth a double module. I think if you want to go to a future employer and say I've worked here, I've worked there. To be able to say actually I spent a year working with this company would actually stand you in really good stead.

The combination of study and work was seen as being valuable.

It's a good way of learning and being paid in the work place. You're going to get a qualification, specialised in your industry... you can't knock it.

### **(c) 'Value' to be reflected in course assessments.**

Student concern was expressed that the value of work undertaken through WBL is not sufficiently recognised by the university.

I was working twelve hour days and I was doing it alright but I had pressure from getting this essay in and that's what the year was marked on, not the fact that I'd taken over a thirty year old woman's job.

My placement year was worth more than that 61% mark to me. It was a life changing experience really and it was worth more than the mark I got from the essay.

I felt a bit undervalued by the university – like they don't care what you do on placement as long as you get the report done.

### **(d) 'Value' for the employer**

Students recognised the economic value of their work to the employer.

At the moment it's fantastic value for money because at the moment they (employers) are paying three times as much to have contractors in to do the jobs they are going to slot us into. So financially it's going to benefit them immensely us doing this course.

Perhaps the module design should suit the company needs as well...

In some circumstances, students perceived that employers valued student feedback.

Something I did with my manager for her was to give 360 degree feedback so she got **my** feedback. She said she found my feedback really really interesting...she did a debrief session with me.

### C. Exploring value: staff perspectives

Views among staff varied as to whether employers were getting good value from WBL, with staff recognising that employers were seeking tangible and intangible benefit (Table 3.20). Staff were consistent in their view that work-based learning experiences were valuable for student learning, even '*life transforming*'.

*Table 3.20: Exploring 'value': staff perspectives*

- |  |
|--|
| (a) 'Value' to employers<br>(b) 'Value' for student learning |
|--|

#### (a) 'Value' to employers

Staff views varied considerably from those who felt obliged to employers for taking on WBL students to those who thought WBL was a valuable way for employers to reduce their recruitment costs.

I'm always very grateful that the employers take the students at all so I'm slightly reluctant to want to impose on them.

Employers are saying "if we can recruit someone via this (WBL), it's a cheaper way for us to get good staff." It's so expensive for companies to recruit. The companies who are doing placements allow a whole year to work out if this is a person we want to recruit or not both whether they want the role and whether they are the right person for the role.

Some staff thought that employers were rather reluctant to provide WBL.

...a lot of psychology clinical employers will have the same approach as the audiology employers in that they really think that are doing the student a favour by letting them be there at all...that's what happens in nursing and audiology and medicine and everything else.

Other HEI staff took a hard line with employers.

We are actually coming from the business school tradition and we have to kind of impose that tradition on the health service and say "well no,

you're getting somebody for free. We expect you to manage this person and not treat them as nuisance who you're doing a favour to so we can let them on the site".

### **(b) 'Value' for student learning**

While staff expressed some ambivalence about the value of WBL to employers, they were consistent in their view that WBL is of value to the student.

If you ask students what the most valuable thing they've had on their degree they'll often say the placement ...and they come back, they are transformed in terms of confidence and maturity and so on...

The students are doing the placement to gain experience of the workforce, to learn to manage their own relationships within a company as well.

We're trying to train the students to be able to make the most of learning opportunities to recognise the fact that there's quite a diversity there and to have their own aims for what they want to achieve on placement and to relate those to competencies and ....about reflecting on their own learning.

.....

In the 'ideal type' of work-based learning arrangement, value will accrue to the student, employer and the university. Yet the three stakeholder groups have different perspectives on what 'value' means for them. HEI staff recognised that employers benefited from WBL in a variety of ways. In return they expected the employer to 'manage' the WBL experience so the student also has value from the experience. Students clearly value WBL in terms of developing their employability and at best the value of the learning experience is transformational.

### **3.3.7 Summary points**

The summary points drawn across Sections 3.3.1– 3.3.6 are collated in Table 3.21.

*Table 3.21: Summary sub-themes, broken down by stakeholder perspective*

| <i>Theme</i>                             | <i>Employer perspectives</i>  | <i>HEI perspectives</i>  | <i>Student perspectives</i>  |
|--|---|--|--|
| Effective employer engagement            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establishing a relationship with the HEI</li> <li>Contribution to course design</li> <li>Contribution to course delivery and support of student learning</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Involvement in WBL courses</li> <li>Access to potential future employees</li> <li>Prior knowledge of students learning</li> <li>The appropriate skills and attributes to WBL</li> <li>Student projects/work which has direct benefit for employer</li> <li>Commitment and engagement of employees with responsibility for students</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quality of supervision</li> <li>Feedback</li> <li>Supported autonomy</li> </ul>   |
| Effective HEI/ Academic staff engagement | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Criticism of HEI teaching of skills</li> <li>A clearly defined role for HEI visiting tutors</li> <li>HEI support for and recognition of employer role</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Providing appropriate support for employer (including role of the visiting tutor)</li> <li>Resources</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Role of the visiting tutor</li> <li>Other support provided by the HEI</li> </ul>  |
| Effective student engagement             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employers and HEI devising assessments</li> <li>Enabling student reflection and experiences to feed back into the course</li> <li>Employers being invited to the HEI to engage students</li> <li>Ensuring that HEI staff have greater knowledge of employment outside the HEI</li> </ul> <p>Student engagement with careers services</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Employer orientation</li> <li>Enabling students to reflect</li> <li>Setting appropriate assessment</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Integration of course based and work-based learning</li> <li>Dedicated support in the workplace</li> <li>Opportunity to learn from others in the workplace</li> <li>Contribution to course development</li> </ul> |
| Ensuring communication                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clarity of person to contact in the HEI</li> <li>Clarity of process between employer</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opportunities to communicate with employers</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clarity of communication between employer and HEI</li> </ul>  |

| <i>Theme</i>          | <i>Employer perspectives</i>   | <i>HEI perspectives</i>  | <i>Student perspectives</i>  |
|-----------------------|--|--|--|
|                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>and HEI</li> <li>• Responsiveness from the HEI</li> <li>• Shared language</li> <li>• Information</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarity of contact person in the employing organisation</li> <li>• Employers not taking advantage of communication and information provided by the HEI</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarity of communication within the employer organisation</li> </ul>  |
| Managing expectations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations of purpose</li> <li>• Expectations of roles and responsibility</li> </ul>                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidance about the employer's role in supporting the student</li> <li>• Guidance for students to manage their expectations of the placement</li> </ul>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employers clarifying in advance their expectations of students</li> <li>• Employers ensuring expectations of students are appropriately shared across their organisation</li> <li>• Employer's knowledge of expectations of the programme of study</li> </ul> |
| Exploring 'value'     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commercial value</li> <li>• 'Value' derived from contributing to student development</li> </ul>           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Value' to employers</li> <li>• 'Value' for student learning</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Value' as learning development</li> <li>• 'Value' for future employment</li> <li>• 'Value' to be reflected in course assessments</li> <li>• 'Value' for the employer</li> </ul>  |

## 4. The Web-based Guide for Employers

The web-based guide for employers was designed to have the following characteristics:

- To be an information hub that employers and other stakeholders can access and return to when looking for support and guidance in supporting students in WBL;
- To allow the sharing of good practice in employer support for students' WBL across different employers, disciplines and HEIs;
- To fuel cross-sector discussion about what constitutes effective support for employers in their support for students in WBL.

In addition it will provide an innovative resource that can be used in learning activities around the appropriateness of support for employers in facilitating students' work-based learning.

For these reasons, the web-based guide comprises two elements:

Part A – resource materials and examples of good practice gathered during the project;

Part B – the construction of digital stories derived from the project as learning objects.

### 4.1 The web-based guide

The web-based guide is designed primarily for employers but also draws together materials of interest to other stakeholders. The content capitalises on evidence drawn together during Stages 1 to 4 of the project. The website resource will provide a gateway to examples of extant resources for employer support as well as new materials generated from the project. The present structure of the web-based guide is outlined below in Table 4.1. In its initial stages, the web site is hosted and maintained by the Pedagogic Research and Scholarship Institute (PRSI) working with Centre for Work-based Learning at the University of Gloucestershire Business School (see [www.glos.ac.uk/research/prsi/WBL\\_EmployerGuide](http://www.glos.ac.uk/research/prsi/WBL_EmployerGuide)). There will be links to other key web sites including the HE Academy, HEIs and employers and their networking/support organisations and other web portals that provide guidance for employers in work-based learning (e.g. Toolkit for work-based learning programs, US Department of Education). Example screens are shown in Figures 1a-e.



Table 4.1: Introduction and structure to the web-based guide

|  |
|--|
| <p><b>HIGHER EDUCATION ACADEMY</b></p> <p><b>WEB-BASED GUIDE FOR EMPLOYERS SUPPORTING STUDENT WORK-BASED LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION</b></p> <p><i>'My placement was a life changing experience and it was worth more than the mark I got from the essay that I had to writ.'</i> (student)</p> <p><i>'Handing over the Placement booklet is not enough!'</i> (HEI staff)</p> <p><i>'It's not so much about guidance; I think it's just about engagement. I think its about the dialogue continuing'</i> (employer)</p> <p>This Guide is based on research carried out during a Higher Education Academy funded project entitled <i>'Integrating employers in effective support for student work-based learning (WBL): an evidence base to inform innovative policy and practice'</i> carried out by the University of Gloucestershire in partnership with Aston University. This guide is intended for use by employers but staff and students involved in work-based learning (WBL) will also find its contents useful. There is an opportunity to feed back and add your experiences in the digital story part of the guide.</p> <p><b>PART A: Project information and resources</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Information about the Higher Education Academy Project</li><li>• Information about the project team</li><li>• Research context to the project</li><li>• Project methodology and outputs</li><li>• Conference presentations about the project</li><li>• Different forms of work-based learning</li><li>• Jargon busting! A glossary of terms in work-based learning</li><li>• Sources accessed during the project</li><li>• Different types of support for employers in WBL (identified from the survey)</li><li>• Links to example models of good practice in supporting employers to provide effective work-based learning environments</li><li>• Themes from our research on employer support needs from different stakeholder (employer, student, staff) perspectives</li></ul> <p><b>PART B: Digital stories – student, employer and HEI staff perspectives</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Quotations and digital stories that capture employer, student and staff perspectives and critical reflections on these themes</li></ul> |
|--|

Figure 1a: Introduction to the digital story part of the Web-based guide for employers



Figure 1b: How to view a digital story

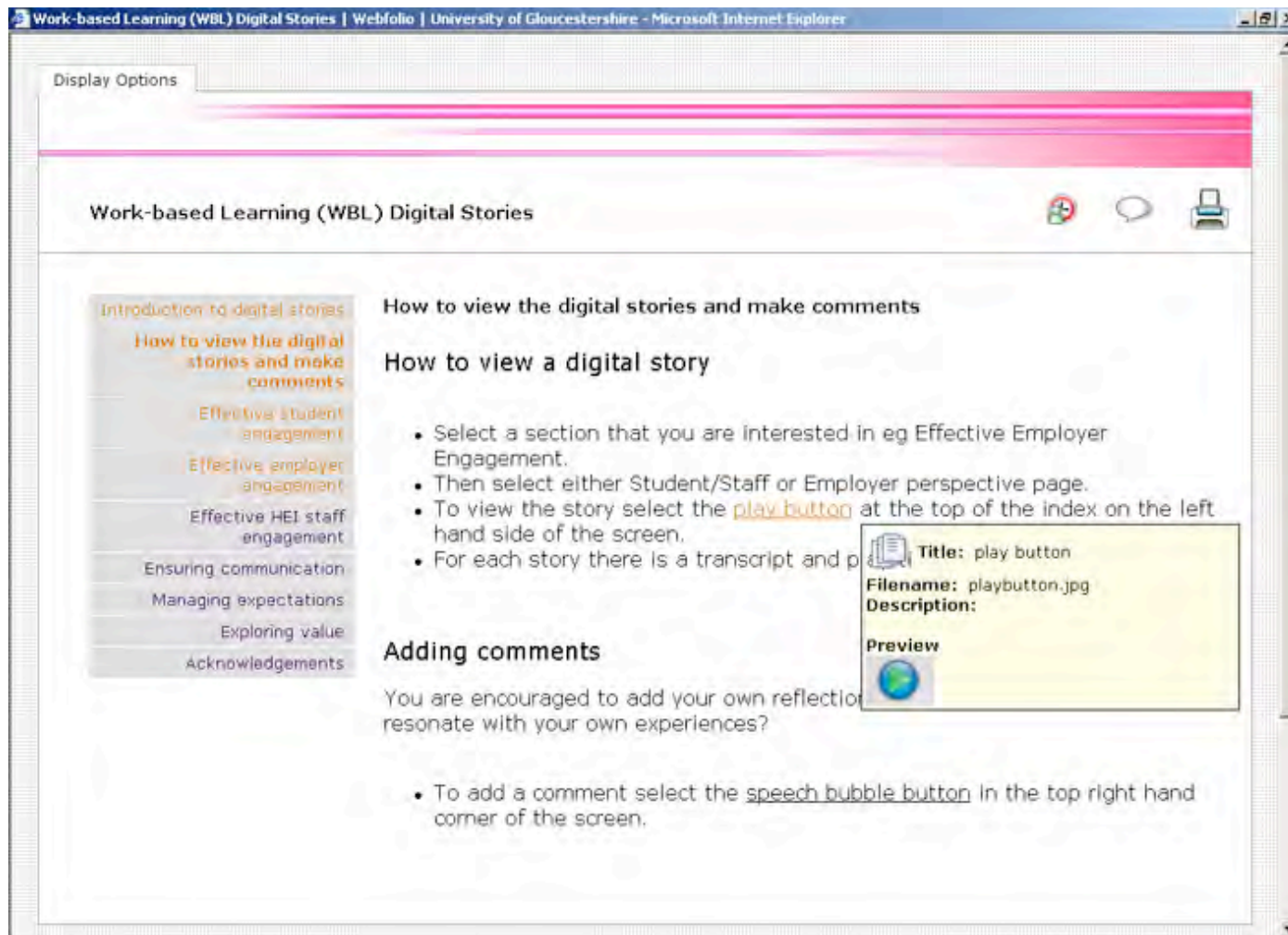


Figure 1c: Example digital story screen – employers





Figure 1d: Example digital story screen – students

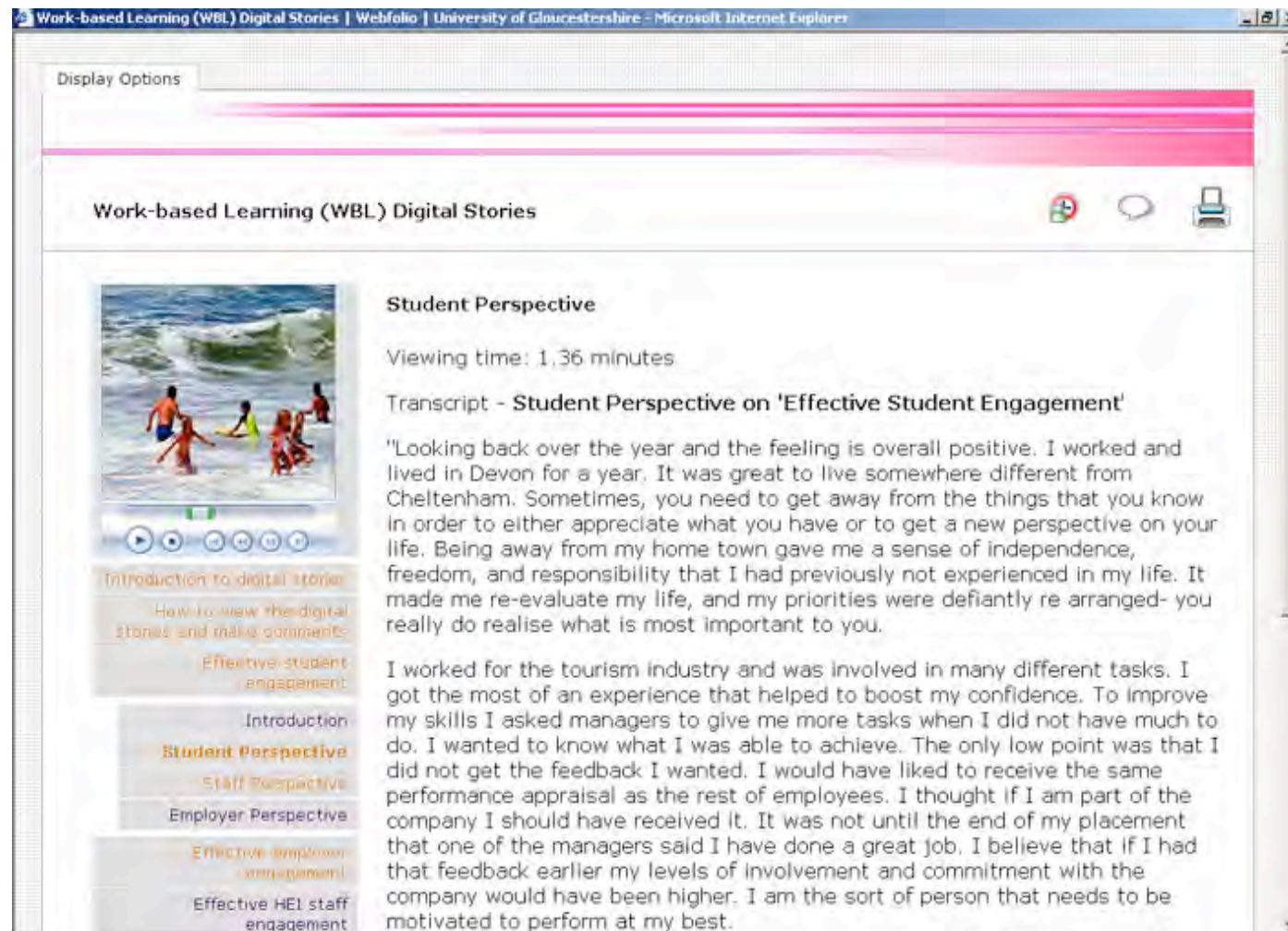
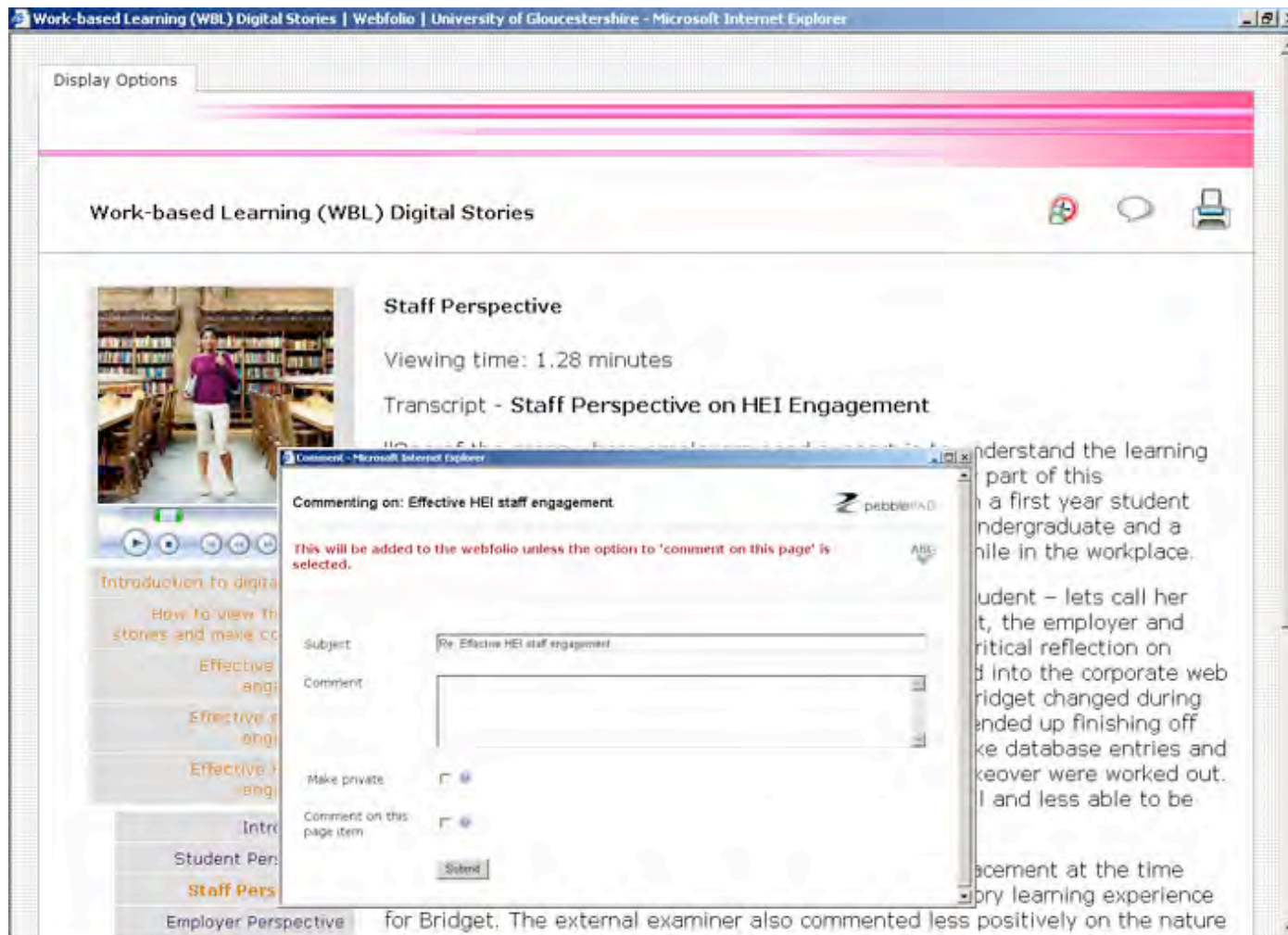


Figure 1e: Example digital story screen – HEI staff



Figure 1f – How to insert a comment/ reflection about a digital story



## 4.2 Digital stories as a reflective learning tool

As outlined in Section 2, the project has introduced digital stories as an innovative medium for conveying the perceptions and critical reflections of different stakeholders (employers, HEI staff and students) on the support that employers need in facilitating effective WBL environments. These stories are structured around the six common and inter-related themes emerging from the data collected in this project (effective employer engagement, effective HEI staff engagement, effective student engagement, ensuring communication, managing expectations and exploring 'value').

Digital story telling was selected as the medium as there is current national pedagogic research interest in how this approach and associated new technologies can be used to promote and support reflective student learning across a range of discipline areas. This is an area where the University of Gloucestershire has undertaken educational development work – both with students and other stakeholders (Boase, 2008 FDTL 5 Meta project, 2006; Tomkins, 2006; Tomkins *et al.*, 2006, Jenkins and Lynch, 2006). Gravestock (2008) summarises the results of a previous Higher Education Academy/Pathfinder project led by the University of Gloucestershire that evaluated digital stories as a medium to encourage student learning. He concluded that digital story telling can be used in 'learning' facilitated by students and staff in a wide variety of ways. Examples are particularly focused around 'critical learning incidents' such as those encountered during work-based learning.

It is not the intention here to provide a comprehensive literature review on digital story telling but these indicative quotes from Boase's (2008) review of the approach provide an introduction to its potential, particularly through capturing student and employer experiences based on reflection-on-action. Boase's review also provides a useful bibliography.

At its most effective, digital storytelling is a powerful tool of emancipation, revelation and discovery to maker and viewer alike. The effectiveness of a digital story depends primarily on the 'story' it tells, enhanced by the images. (Boase, 2008 p1)

Generally the method associated with digital storytelling offers the potential to:

- promote deep reflection, review, analysis and ordering of information (e.g. a project, a topic, an experience);
- value emotional/personal input;
- make sense of experience;
- encourage cooperative activity;
- create powerful end products that can have a transformative effect on maker and viewer alike;
- develop capacity for self-review;
- build confidence;
- give a voice to the unheard or marginalised (Boase, 2008, p9).

The digital stories are therefore a different and innovative medium through which to communicate the similarities and differences in stakeholder perception and inform



support needs for effective WBL. At their best, digital stories aspire to Ohler's (2006) view:

The strength of digital stories lies in their potential to blend digital, oral, art and written literacies, creating 'literally a portfolio unto itself (cited by Boase, 2008, p6).

In this research project, the medium of digital story telling has been used to illustrate a range of perspectives, however, it is recognised that their full potential could be further developed. There was robust debate amongst the project team as to what constitutes a digital story. In this project, digital stories are not the end *product* of individual reflection, rather they contribute to the *process* of corroborative reflection incorporating the narrator and the 'reader/viewer'.

#### **4.2.1 Definitions and practical design**

For the purposes of this project, a digital 'story' is an interpretation of, or critical reflection on, what has happened in a given situation. This project has constructed a set of 18 digital stories of different lengths (audio with three to four images) and four audio recordings without images. Transcripts are provided in Appendices 7a-c. The stories are constructed around a series of learning points (see Table 4.2), drawn out as powerful exemplification of issues raised during the project's focus groups and interviews. The digital stories have been embedded within a shared electronic portfolio (using the e-portfolio system Pebblepad) which will be accessible from the project web site. The Pebblepad 'shell' allows transcripts of the stories to be added to ensure accessibility for all users. This 'shell' also allows the addition of feedback/reflections from those that access the individual digital stories. The stories are not therefore a static resource and others beyond the project can feedback on their own use of the digital stories as learning objects and thus contribute to the resource.

#### **4.2.2 Evaluation and feedback**

A specimen digital story was produced for the project's 'expert seminar'. Participant feedback from the seminar indicated that some employers engaged more immediately and positively than others with the potential of the digital story as a reflective learning resource. In part, this was down to the newness of the medium and the way the story was presented – in the third person. The nature of the 'digital story' was altered in the light of this feedback to represent the 'voice' in first person of employer, student or HEI staff. When the full web resource has been completed, there needs to be further investigation and evaluation of its effective use in developing the knowledge and expertise of different stakeholders. Such development will be key in providing on-going support for employers in facilitating active, reflective WBL environments for students.

*Table 4.2: Learning points associated with the digital stories that capture different stakeholder voices*

| <i>Theme</i>                  | <i>Sub-themes</i>  | <i>Employer voice</i>  | <i>Student voice</i>  | <i>HEI staff voice</i>   |
|-------------------------------|--|--|---|--|
| Effective employer engagement | Active longitudinal engagement<br><br>Involvement with course design and set up beyond WBL | Story 1a: Employers will be well prepared to support students if they are involved in course design and can feed into course review and development.   | Story 1b: HEIs and employers need to have shared understanding of the challenge and stretch of the WBL experience, initiated by the HEI. It is recognised that the employer will not want to take business risks. | Story 1c: Support for employers needs to be long term and sustainable so all develop and share knowledge. Employers need to be engaged from the outset as partners not as end users.   |
| Effective HEI engagement      | Roles and responsibilities<br><br>Shared aims<br><br>Assessment                            | Story 2a: Employers need clarification about the role and responsibility of the student's placement or 'visiting' tutor to avoid duplication and confusion in meeting the supervisory needs of the students. | Story 2b: Employer and HEI need to liaise to ensure that the assessment can be made appropriate to the WBL experience.  | Story 2c: HEI to take responsibility for sharing work placement aims with employers and to recognise that there must be some flexibility for both parties e.g. for HEI to extend or revise an alternative assessment to meet any changing circumstances. |

| <i>Theme</i>                 | <i>Sub-themes</i>            | <i>Employer voice</i>  | <i>Student voice</i>  | <i>HEI staff voice</i>  |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Effective student engagement | Need for student empowerment | Story 3a: Students need to be prepared by the HEI that skills they have learnt in theory will need to be put into practice in the work place. And 'flexibility' is a key skill and employers will be keen to support those that demonstrate their ability and willingness to deal with changing conditions | Story 3b: On-going feedback (formal and informal) motivates students. HEIs need to discuss with employers the range of feedback to be given to students during the WBL.   | Story 3c: While HEIs can set up opportunities for students to develop skills in critical reflection, encouragement from employers to use those skills in the workplace is crucial.  |
| Ensuring communication       | Feedback                     | Story 4a: Employers are entitled to a very clear, efficient and responsive system of communication with the HEI to help them support students in their 'day to day' WBL when problems or points of clarification might arise.  | Story 4b: Putting information in a booklet is not sufficient. Employers need to know the precise role of the visiting tutor and this is best achieved by dialogue. For example, the roles and responsibilities of HEI visiting tutors and the timing of their visits need to be discussed with both employer and student to optimise their value. | Story 4c: Staff felt that employers are entitled to clear, efficient and responsive systems of communication with the HEI to help them support students in their 'day to day' WBL when problems or points of clarification might arise. |

| <i>Theme</i>          | <i>Sub-themes</i>                         | <i>Employer voice</i>   | <i>Student voice</i>  | <i>HEI staff voice</i>  |
|-----------------------|---|---|---|---|
| Managing expectations | Work environment<br><br>Stakeholder roles | Story 5a: There is a need for employers to understand what is expected of the student AND what it expected of employers and what support is available from the HEI.   | Story 5b: It is important to give employers opportunities to discuss in advance with students and staff what students are going to do on WBL so all are prepared.   | Story 5c: HEIs need to create opportunities to liaise with employers about the changing purposes and requirements of WBL, for the benefits of the student and the employer.       |
| Ensuring value        | Reflection on value                       | Story 6a: Employers can be supported by HEI having a well-developed understanding of their economic context and business priorities. The relationship will only work in the long-term if it is mutually beneficial. | Story 6b: HEIs and employers need to share understandings of the different types of learning that take place in WBL including the value of informal learning – to maximise the value for the students. The latter includes feeling valued in the workplace and the opportunity to learn from role models. | Story 6c: Employers' support for students' learning could be enhanced by providing opportunities for HEI staff to meet for briefings individually or in groups in the work place. |

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

Students undertaking WBL refer to gaining valuable experience, learning how to manage their relationships within an employer setting as often they struggle with how to make sense of their learning and how to articulate it in an effective way for future graduate employment. From a HEI staff perspective, this is really a case of equipping students to make the most of the opportunities before, during and after work experience, to make meaning from their experiences and then to translate this learning into tangible skills and competencies which have been achieved. This means a shift in focus to empower students to take some control and responsibility for their role in the working environment to place them more 'centre stage' in a more balanced partnership with their employer and their tutors. In order to contribute to WBL student empowerment through active reflective learning, it is crucial that employer engagement is supported by the HEI.

There is a large research and policy literature on WBL in the UK and internationally but a significant gap in the research and practice literature on good practice in supporting employers in the creation of effective active WBL environments for students. The literature is, however, clear about the support needs of employers in relation to overcoming barriers and facilitating effective WBL (see for example, Davies, 2002). Evidence from the project's national survey of HEIs suggests that the development of WBL policies is not consistent within the HE sector. From the perspective of the institutions such inconsistency may be explicable given the range of institutional diversity; to employers such inconsistency operates as a barrier to engagement.

At institutional level, many WBL related policies appear to be embedded in other institutional policy documents such as the Assessment policy; Teaching, Learning and Assessment strategy; Employability strategy, rather than being discrete and well signposted entities. This raises the question of the accessibility of such policies in terms of both location and language, particularly to employers.

### 5.1 From 'support' to 'engagement'

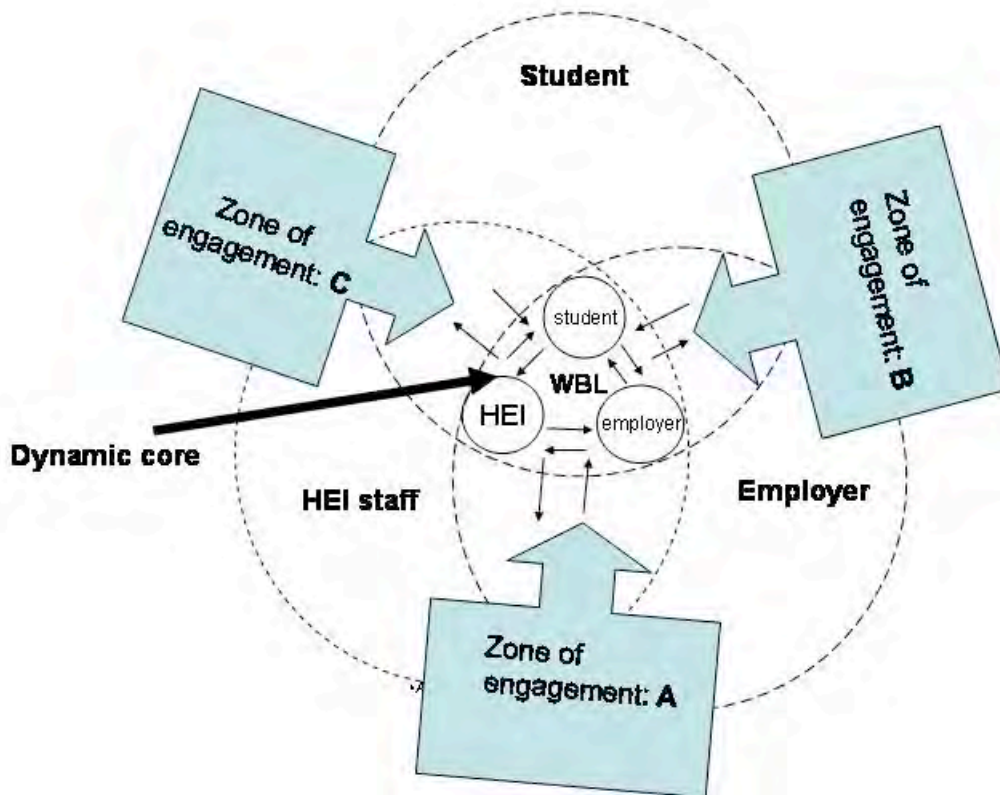
This discussion integrates analyses from three stages of the research – the literature review, the survey of HEIs and transcripts from the focus groups, interviews and expert seminar. Each inter-related stage generated a discrete set of themes (see Tables 3.1 and 3.2) which were progressively focused into six primary inter-related themes (Table 3.19). The themes are effective stakeholder engagement (employer, student and HEI staff), ensuring communication, managing expectations and exploring values. Common to all these themes was the concept of 'engagement' which was manifest in different forms. Thus in the course of the project, the emphasis has shifted from a focus on 'support' for employers in supporting student work-based learning to a focus on employer 'engagement' to optimise student learning. The outcome of this shift is represented as a conceptual framework 'zones of engagement' discussed below.

#### 5.1.1 Zones of engagement

Figure 2 provides a diagrammatic illustration of the different 'zones of engagement' of the three stakeholders – employers, students and HEIs. This figure can be used both as

a model for exploring the inter-related contributions of the three stakeholders that provide the dynamic *context* or '*backdrop*' to the specific WBL activity, and for exploring the *dynamic core* that encapsulates stakeholder engagement in the differing stages of WBL. The model recognises the symbiotic relationship between the 'core' and the 'contexts' to effective employer engagement in supporting students in WBL activities. Although employers, students and HEIs all contribute to the development and sustenance of the different zones of engagement (both contextual and core), the project has remained true to its primary focus on the employer role in facilitating, supporting and promoting student learning.

Figure 2: Zones of engagement that provide a context to WBL and the dynamic core



## 5.2 Contexts to employer engagement

The following tables present illustrative examples of different *levels* of engagement drawn from the research. The contextual zones of engagement (A to C) can be characterised in a range of ways. They encompass engagement at different levels – from the strategic planning of organisations and departments and HEIs to operational 'on the ground' activity of individuals (Table 5.1). Table 5.2, representing activity within the core zone, also incorporates three *stages* of engagement 'pre-' 'during' and 'post' WBL.

*Table 5.1: Contexts to engagement*

**Contextual Zone A: Employer – HEI**

*Strategic*

- Joint membership of regional/national HEI/employer networks
- Establishment of Employability Forum with joint HEI Employer membership
- Strategic partnerships between HEI and employer
- Joint memberships of employer/HEI councils/governing bodies
- HEI/employer collaborate together in research and consultancy
- Joint course planning HEI 'aligning' course objectives with employer objectives
- Promoting Knowledge Transfer Partnerships

*Operational*

- Key 'bridging' staff (joint appointment between HEI and employer)
- Reciprocal secondments of HEI and employee staff
- Employer involvement in Course Boards
- Employer feedback in the design and validation of new programmes
- HEI contributions to employer CPD activities
- Regular dialogue between HEI and employer
- Employer involvement in University or Faculty level Advisory Boards

**Contextual Zone B: Employer – student**

*Strategic*

- Student Unions represented in employer network organisations
- Student involvement in Employer Forums
- Employer representatives on student union bodies
- Employer involvement in career events

*Operational*

- Employers and students actively represented on Course Boards
- Student/alumni contributions to employer publications
- Employer contributions to alumni activities

**Contextual Zone C: HEI – student**

*Strategic*

- Students feeding back into course boards for course development
- Development of 'shell' frameworks to accredit student learning through part-time employment
- Student representation on Faculty/Academic Boards

*Operational*

- Developing key skills and competencies in individual students
- Devising negotiated assessments
- Developing personal skills and capital

*Table 5.2: Exploring the Core Zone - WBL activity*

| <i>Strategic level</i>  |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| HEIs establish units to provide centralised support for WBL and employer engagement activities<br>HEIs establish coordinated activity among individual departments providing WBL<br>HEIs determine policy on areas of WBL   |  |   |
| <i>Operational – all stakeholders</i>   |  |   |
| <b>Pre-WBL</b>  | <b>During WBL</b>  | <b>Post WBL</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear information and guidelines, establishing processes of communication and clarifying expectations</li> <li>• WBL Employer Mentor development</li> <li>• Employers contributed to design of assessment and clarification of their role in the assessment process</li> </ul> | <p>Clear point of contact in HEI in case of problems or issues during placement</p> <p>Clear expectations and agreed arrangements of HEI tutor visits</p> <p>Processes for employers to give formative and assessment feedback to students and receive feedback themselves on the WBL experience</p> | <p>Critical reflection involving all stakeholders leading to action planning and implementation</p> |

Figure 2 shows the nature of the interaction at a moment in time but recognises the positive feedback gained from critical and iterative reflection on the WBL process that impacts both on the WBL setting itself and the different broader contexts to WBL in supporting employers in WBL activity. The 'zones of engagement' have an important temporal element for all stakeholders though of different kinds. The synthesis below reflects on key aspects of how the zones function, with a particular focus on employer support and engagement. It should be noted that employer engagement (and indeed the zones of engagement framework) is not set in a vacuum and will be influenced and shaped by changing political, economic and social factors.

### 5.3 Sustaining engagement

A key means of sustaining engagement is through building strong relationships as on-going partnerships between employers and HEIs. This requires positive action from both employer and HEI. A relationship between an employer and HEI needs to be proactively sustained and is potentially at its best when it extends over time. This requires an exploration of the key factors in developing and maintaining a healthy HEI-employer relationship. These might include: knowledge of each other and understanding of needs and expectations, openness, reliability and the ability to be constructively critical in developing and supporting the student WBL experience. Closer on-going working



relationships between HEIs and employers are identified as paramount (Nixon *et al.*, 2006) and reinforced by the evidence from the focus groups.

In contrast with the sustained relationship between HEI and employer stakeholders, the student's engagement with them through WBL, whilst an active one, may be comparatively short lived if the student is full-time in higher education. Nevertheless the WBL experience can be a significant episode in the individual student's journey of lifelong learning. It is recognised that the situation may be different in the context of part-time employed students. Good practice in establishing longitudinal relationships between students and employer includes using a series of students in sequence as a 'daisy chain' – who each induct/inform or support their successor working for the same employer. Thus knowledge and experiences can be passed back through the student group and inform future student preparation and course development.

Both evaluation and critical reflection on the role of different stakeholders in the success of the WBL experience are critical for all involved in developing relationships that are mutually beneficial and lasting. It is perhaps telling that each stakeholder group has plenty to say about the other but less to say about themselves!! ("Oh would some power the gift to give us, to see ourselves as others see us...!")

#### 5.4 Good practice in planning for engagement

The findings of this project suggest that whilst there are many examples of very effective partnerships between employers and universities, their development is inconsistent across and within institutions. They may be dependent upon ad hoc individual initiatives and protected personal relationships, rather than being guided by institutional priorities and guidelines.

Planning for engagement can take place at a variety of levels from the institutional to the individual – with or without collaboration between HEI and employer. This planning for engagement needs to be sufficiently flexible to enable and support enterprise and initiative as well ensuring coherence and continuity. The research project suggested that *collaborative* planning is needed, along with the development of synergetic activities that provide positive feedback to the quality of setting for WBL. Attention needs to be given to managing expectations and exploring values, ensuring meaningful engagement and making space for critical reflection. These features are considered below.

- **Collaborative planning.** A critical element of employer engagement is for HEIs to plan *with* employers. At an institutional level, it is important to plan strategically for synergy of activities that provide the contexts to engagement. This will enable relationships to be built between HEIs and organisations for research, knowledge co-generation and/or consultancy, providing a positive and integrated setting for WBL activity. Support for employers in WBL can therefore be integrated with support for other types of employer engagement. When there is planning for engagement, this enables decision-making for effective partnerships. It also allows for the more formal processes of monitoring, review and evaluation to take place. In addition, collaborative planning might involve reciprocal membership of key planning and development groups.

- **Planning structurally.** Here engagement needs to occur at the level of optimising course design. This involves nesting the WBL with prior and subsequent learning in the university and the workplace. There needs to be discussion about how to achieve the most from the WBL activity for all parties and this requires involving employers at the design stage. Ownership at this stage is an important springboard to employer engagement closer to the actual WBL experience. HEIs need to help employers understand what the University and students are trying to achieve. Universities may need to be more specific about the learning objectives they want students to achieve, the value of WBL to all involved and what all parties should expect to get out of the WBL activity. They may also need to do more to manage the expectations of those involved and prepare students individually for the needs of a specific WBL activity.
- **Planning for expectations.** A central theme which has emerged from the project is the importance of managing expectations based on the apparent differences and complex needs of the stakeholders involved in the relationships between employers, students and the academic institutions.
- **Planning informed by values.** The exploration of *values* includes mutual recognition of how the value of the WBL is perceived by different stakeholders, given the different demands on time and how time is costed. Consideration needs to be given to prioritising the balance of activities when working with employers and a heightened sense that time is money. When employers enter into the partnership, it is a commercial decision as they have got to devote resources (put resources aside) and make time to actually support WBL students. Employers can also gain significant benefits from student WBL such as placements in terms of trialling a future investment for the company. It is therefore about not overburdening employers whilst at the same time creating beneficial experiences for all concerned. Employers need clarity about their responsibilities in a way that supports their investment in the student.

Students also suggested that the contribution of the assessment of their WBL placement to their final award may not always reflect the value of the learning experience they had had. In view of this, HEIs may need in their planning to consider how they reflect this value through the award to encourage students to participate fully in WBL. Value also involves exploring how the WBL experience can be made transformational for the student. This requires all stakeholder engagement with thinking about and planning for how transformational learning might differ from other forms of learning.

- **Planning for responsibilities** Employers can be supported by ensuring that the responsibilities for different parties (university, student and employer) are clearly defined and understood. An example could be 'mirroring' where HEIs have an 'employer link' person and employers have an 'HEI link' person.
- **Planning for meaningful learning.** It is important to make all engagement with employers meaningful and to avoid acceptance of box-ticking support activities in WBL. For example, tutor visits to the workplace do not just need to occur; they need to be planned, timed and agreed in a format to benefit all stakeholders. It is also important to manage information needs and plan for student support.

- **Planning aimed at ‘best fit’.** A key part of planning to support the employer is in matching the right student to the right WBL experience. This involves knowing the industry, knowing the company, knowing students’ strengths and weaknesses, knowing students’ interests and aims of career development (e.g. which industry, which direction) and helping students manage expectations (e.g. type and job level). This requires three-way dialogue. It is important to tailor the selection of the student to the student’s vocational aspirations and employer skills needs. A key critical reflection of the project is around issues about ensuring ‘best fit’. Students need to be profiled and well matched in terms of skills and knowledge for the demands of the WBL experience. The reality is to meet the needs of particular student abilities with particular company requirement. This involves attention to professional needs, vocational needs, personal needs and diversity needs. To help achieve this, employers need information about the students involved in WBL, both staff and employer focus groups suggesting that employers need pre-knowledge of the work placement students they employ, their capabilities, strengths and their weaknesses.
- **Planning for student preparation.** HEIs need to plan so that students are well prepared for WBL. It was recognised through the project that employers can also be ‘supported’ by the university itself supporting the students before and during placement in a variety of ways. Both employers and staff believed that students need to have updated knowledge and skills such as presentation skills and time management, before they commence WBL, to enable all parties to benefit fully from the experience.
- **Planning for reflection.** Supporting students to get the most out of their WBL experience means introducing the idea of learning through reflection before they begin formal work experience then providing tools and techniques which provide private and social reflective space. This activity can then be supported during the placement (see Section 5.6).
- **Planning for entitlement.** HEIs need to broker and agree student entitlements with both employers and students in advance of the placement experience. This might include the time allocated during the WBL experience to complete assessment tasks.

In planning, it is important to factor in making space for engagement and for critical all-stakeholder reflection on the success of planning. Planning for links and the development of employer networking opportunities through the university are also important. Good examples include engagement in employers’ forums and all stakeholder networks to share experiences and awareness of good practices in supporting employers. Employers frequently engage with more than one university and can draw on comparative experiences.

## 5.5 Good practice in facilitating engagement through effective communication

A key theme that came out of stakeholder discussions was the importance of supporting employers through effective communication. This involves promoting both the language and means of engagement and ensuring both are meaningful and effective. The requirement for extended dialogue between all parties in terms of shared language, managed expectations and understanding of WBL purposes, objectives, and procedures (e.g. how assessment relates to the placement) was also identified. Responsibilities

need to be clearly defined and communicated to avoid situations of apparent lack of understanding. For example, it needs to be clear if employers are expected to comment on student reports or what students' study time entitlements might be while on their placement.

More interaction between HEI and employer is needed to facilitate the engagement process. This can involve using both 'old' and 'new' technologies that allow synchronous and asynchronous communication. 'Communication' is conceived as more than the transfer of information and guidelines – the easy supplying of a handbook to disseminate information and the ticking of the requirement as 'done'. HEIs need to provide all involved with simple, clear and consistent information and guidelines about the roles of employers, students and the universities themselves in the work placement (or other WBL) activity. Effective communication also involves employers (actually) coming into the University to engage students and find out more about the learning objectives of the placement rather than simply being sent a book to read.

Employers are expecting HEIs to provide easily accessible information relating to the practicalities of planning and implementing WBL, delivered through the appropriate medium and in a timely fashion. Employers seek dedicated, responsive contacts with whom they can communicate for problem solving within Universities. Key elements are responsiveness, and tailoring to different needs. There may be resource implications in relation to HEI resources to communicate effectively to support employer engagement in effective WBL.

Innovative use of new technologies can be particularly helpful in facilitating employer engagement. There is obvious potential for the use of electronic media as the basis for information exchange between all parties in WBL, but it raises questions of the appropriateness of media in relation to the stakeholders involved. Examples include: use of communication technologies (student with student; alumni with student; student with HEI and employer); the use of virtual advisory boards (web-conferencing); virtual learning environments and web-based guides. These methods of engagement have varying degrees of inclusivity and requirements for training.

Another key area when working to facilitate engagement through effective communication is to identify the key bridging points – at the levels of 'Centres' and individuals. For example, employers tend to see a Careers Centre as a key bridging point. Some Careers Centres are changing their names to Employability Centres and suchlike to reflect their wider role in employer engagement. At an individual level, clearly identified individuals with responsibility are critical and valued – both work placement tutors and employer mentors for students.

## **5.6 Good practice in building positive engagement during WBL through reflection**

As well as pre-WBL planning activities, there are other actions *during* WBL that can increase the likelihood of WBL providing an optimal learning experience for the student. The main area of consideration is reflective practice and the development of reflective practitioners.

HEIs need to work with employers to encourage critical reflection among all stakeholders as the WBL progresses. Our research showed that in the spirit of partnership, employers – once cognisant of the intended learning outcomes from WBL – believed that they have a role to play in helping the student to reflect on WBL and encourage the skills in reflective practice. So universities have a role to ‘train’ their students to be able to make the most out of learning opportunities and to recognise the fact that there is increasing diversity in the ‘world of work’. Capturing students’ thoughts and ideas is important; working with these for personal improvement is crucial. The idea of reflective practice being at the heart of enhancing performance in work placement may be a new concept for students. It is crucial to find ways and spaces for students to ‘stop and think’ about what they are doing along the way and why. HEI staff were clearly aware of the need to prepare and support students and indeed employers in developing reflective practice skills and approaches. In feedback from the expert seminar, it was suggested that ‘the language of reflection was not always accessible’ to employers.

The potential role for electronic media in promoting student reflection needs further exploration in this context. Increasingly higher education is developing techniques to support reflective practice generally in learning, building on the idea of learning diaries and using web based technology to aid this process. This technology is ideally suited to WBL when the student may be distant from the university. By communicating virtually and working online, there may be opportunity to find space where issues such as reflection on skills and competencies development and progression can be shared with peers, tutors, and employers. HEIs need to stress the importance of this activity to employers and students, as well making sure that all stakeholders carve out time to act on this feedback in a formative way during the WBL activity.

## 5.7 Towards an Employer Entitlement Quality Kitemark for HEIs

The results of the survey of HEIs demonstrate that there is a large range of types of employer support in employer engagement and much good generic practice in relation to WBL. While there are many different examples of support for employers across the HE sector, the results from the survey suggest that there is a lack of consistency. The standard, quality and degree to which the approach to employer support is consistent, systematic and accessible varies within and between institutions. This evidence is corroborated by the research into perceptions of good practice in employer engagement with stakeholders from the two case-study HEIs.

In WBL, all stakeholders including employers are active learners and for the relationship to work, it requires motivation, engagement and ownership. Good practice for *one* of the stakeholders in Figure 2 is highly likely to impact positively on the other two groups. This mirrors the research on inclusive practice, which indicates that what is good for one group benefits others (Grace and Gravestock, 2008).

Employers should expect a *base-level entitlement* in HEI engagement – to be decided collaboratively by HEI and employers, drawing on evidence-based exemplars of nationally recognised good practice that can be tailored to different HEI/employer settings. Such tailoring might involve support in dealing with different ‘types’ of student diversity (e.g. in supporting students with special needs). In implementing good practice, it is important to avoid tick-box activities and to ensure that all engagement is

meaningful. Employers need to be supported by planning modelled on 'good practice in planning for engagement' outlined above in Section 5.4. This planning could be informed by the strategic and operational activities presented within the discussion on 'zones of engagement' (Table 5.1). Ten examples of possible baseline entitlements (derived from the study) are proposed below.

1. Employers having the opportunity for involvement in academic courses such as contributing to course design, giving guest lectures to students and staff or contributing to specific programme sessions;
2. Employers having clear guidance on how the WBL element fits with the wider academic programme if appropriate;
3. Employers being entitled to opportunities for dialogue (in addition to any passive receipt of information);
4. Employers including employer mentors being involved in the HEI tutor visit of WBL students;
5. Employers agreeing with HEIs their precise responsibilities to students;
6. Employers knowing key HEI contacts and responsiveness times;
7. Employers receiving information about the students' prior learning achievements;
8. Employer mentors/supervisors or student line managers having opportunities for training and updating provided by the HEI (e.g. working with student diversity and special needs; new approaches to learning and teaching; developing reflective practice and new learning technologies);
9. Employers receiving and discussing formal feedback from HEIs and WBL students;
10. Development of the role of the employer to help the student to reflect on their WBL/placement experience and learning objectives. This involves both support and sharing of critical reflections.

## **5.8 The Employer Guide to WBL**

Although the Employer Guide is produced for employers, it is important that all stakeholders engage with the evidence from which it is derived. The guide has the potential for use in development activities for employers and also other stakeholders.

## **5.9 Critique of research methodology and future research**

While the initial stage of the research focused on national patterns, the focus group studies explored the experiences of two institutions located in different settings, and the expert seminar then tested those findings with a larger group of academics and employers. This study has proposed ways of investigating employer support and engagement through a framework of zones of engagement. Research is now needed to investigate the perceptions of a wider group of employers involved in WBL across the sector using and developing the framework. This could involve mapping stakeholders perspectives on different themes e.g. feedback including the employer role.

The qualitative research methodology recognises that access is a process rather than an 'event'. The employers were a challenging group to access and it is acknowledged that their responses may not be typical of all employers, not least since the employers referred to in

this section agreed to make time to be involved in the research project. It would be useful for future research to explore issues around employer engagement in the placement in comparison to other forms of WBL and issues around employer support for different *scales* of business (from SME to blue chip companies).

As WBL moves more towards a model in which learning is undertaken predominantly in the workplace by employees, at a time and pace to suit the learner and employer, HEIs will need to prepare for additional support to meet the changing employer needs which will inevitably arise. Whilst there is already some experience of this in the 'professional programmes', research needs to be undertaken to explore and address employer support needs in this context. What is evident is that there will be a demand for a much more flexible approach by HEIs to accommodate this shift to increased accredited learning in the workplace, and employers will need to be proactive in advising HEIs of their requirements to support learners.

## 6. Recommendations

The following recommendations arise from the project:

1. The HE Academy should consider recommendations for an Employer Entitlement Quality Kitemark for HEIs. Employers are entitled to expect base-level provision in engagement to be decided collaboratively by HEI and employers. This should draw on a tool-box of nationally recognised good practice with provision that could then be tailored to different HEI/ employer settings. The results from this project could form a starting point for such discussions.
2. HEIs should give more focused consideration to the development of clear, consistent, accessible WBL policies, which include good practice in employer engagement.
3. Institutions should review their WBL practices in the light of the practical employer engagement and support issues raised by this project. These include a focus on effective stakeholder engagement, managing expectations, ensuring communication and an exploration of value. Other key aspects include clear points of contact with employers; understanding employer needs; and encouraging interactions – both tutor visiting and inviting employers into the HEI.
4. Synergistic activities identified in the zones of engagement should be identified and planned for strategically.
5. The HE sector should work with employer groups to facilitate opportunities for employers to share good practice in how they support effective student WBL. This could be through employer networks but also through fora facilitated by universities.
6. There should be accessible guidance for employers to support their role in WBL. The 'Web-based guide for employers' produced as an outcome of this project provides a starting point in this respect. The potential for the use of digital stories in relation to reflection on WBL should be further investigated through the contributions and reflections of those accessing the web site.



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## Appendix 1: Review of literature and institutional practice (Stages 1 and 2)

The literature review (Stage 1) found numerous studies on WBL and employer engagement from a strategic perspective, but far less on the more practical level of preparation and delivery of WBL and nothing on effective HEI support for employers. Much is written from a strategic perspective, but it is harder to find detail about practical initiatives that have been undertaken. The need to develop a strong relationship between employers and HEIs appears to be one of the key themes and it runs consistently throughout the literature. This includes:

- *Course development*: This is frequently mentioned in all sorts of sources, including how to increase employer understanding of courses and their meaningful involvement in course design.
- *Value for money*: The employer perspective is a commercial one. They are looking for a positive impact on productivity and performance through involvement in WBL.
- *Barriers faced by universities and colleges in being responsive to employers*: These include: cost/finance; the complexity of our systems; the lack of a common language/understanding; the lack of HEI's responsiveness and flexibility.
- *Key challenges involving mutual understanding of employer/HEI needs and developing the relationship*. The lack of research studies around these issues means that there is a very limited evidence base to inform practice.

The review of institutional practice (Stage 2) involved a review of practical guidance in relation to employer support and what is available through various relevant organisations. Most examples relate to work placement. Some examples of institutional practice are provided in the documents in Table 6.1.

*Table 6.1: Reports providing examples of institutional practice*

|   |
|---|
| Brennan, J., Little, B., Connor, H., Weert, E., Delve, S., Harris, J., Josselyn, B., Ratcliffe, N. and Scesa, A. (2006) <i>Towards a strategy for workplace learning</i> . Report for HEFCE, Centre for Higher Education Research and Information (CHERI) and KPMG. |
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#### **A. An international, context-setting literature review to identify models of effective practice on HEI support for the employers' role in contributing to successful, active WBL environments**

From the national and international literature sources and the policy reports (e.g. Department for Universities, Innovation and Skills, 2008; Hughes, 2003; Haywood, and Nixon, 2007; KSA Partnership, 2007; Council for Industry and Higher Education, 2007), there is a lack of effective practice on HEI support for the employers' role in contributing to successful active WBL environments.

##### **1. Current levels of HE-employer engagement: an initial assessment**

- There is a diverse range of *employer engagement* in HE, but also potential barriers to further extension.
- Employer engagement can involve provision that is employer-designed (such as foundation degrees), employer-funded (usually through support for student fees), and employer-delivered (in the workplace). In certain sectors – especially teaching, healthcare and social care, where the employer in question is a large public sector organisation – the employer's funding contributions to undergraduate programmes are obviously main stream, as a major investment in workforce development. In other sectors, however, employer funding of HE plays a much smaller role.
- There is already a broad range of two-way engagement between HE and employers. There is evidence in three areas of explicit employer involvement:
  - Numbers of students on work-based programmes
  - Income from employers (fees and other incomes)
  - Institutional infrastructure
- In terms of employer contributions to funding, fees for part-time undergraduate learners are sometimes paid by employers. The proportion paid is significant but not major.
- There is clearly a pressing impetus for change in some areas of HE activity; in order to build on the sector's successful track record in meeting the needs of employers in other areas. Professional bodies exert considerable influence on the content of HE programmes.
- However, it is clear that HEFCE currently does not have enough information – both quantitative and qualitative – to identify which large-scale interventions they could undertake to add value.

- There is a need to synthesise the findings of the extensive and complex literature on skills and the labour market being produced by a range of agencies, to inform policy development. HEFCE needs to understand the factors, cultural and otherwise, that may make engaging with CPD a lower priority for organisations. This is a complex area and it will be important for HEFCE's policies to demonstrate added value.
- Therefore, in finalising the aims for HEFCE's strategy, identifying what types of change are needed and how ambitious HEFCE should be in delivering these, *there is a need for greater clarity about the current 'baseline' for activity, what new data need to be collected, and how much capacity there is for increased quality and quantity of employer engagement* (Council for Industry and Higher Education, 2007).

## 2. Key themes identified in the reports

There are some key themes in the literature and policy reports, in particular in Davies, 2002). These are: communication (p22); placement preparation; (p64-65); perception of courses (course leader, employers and students) (p65); the operating mechanism of supervised work experience (p65); pre-placement training (p65); perceived effective communication between groups (p66); the interaction of tutors, employers and students in the creation of any profile of competencies (p67); employers' involvement in course design (meaningful feedback from employers) and employers' understanding about a course (p69); employers take an active and informed role in training and assessing students who are on placement (p76); a need for training in assessment for tutor and work supervisors; (p94) marginal benefits for the employers due to the students lacking the necessary experience or knowledge of specific techniques, consequently requiring enhanced supervision; or discontinuity of work occurring on the arrival and departure of a student (p120); resource implications of placement (well organised and resourced placement activity by teaching institutions) (p123-124).

## 3. Recommendations for course development

Davies (2002) refers to numerous factors related to course development including the need to develop competencies and objectives, ensure pre-placement briefing of students, and involve a range of stakeholders in course design and development. Course developers need to pay attention to the wide range of learning styles of work-based learners. In developing courses, there needs to be awareness of different supervisor and tutor approaches to leadership and learning, and that work-based learning needs to be appropriately resourced and managed.

## 4. Employer perspectives – Business Benefit – Value, Value, Value

HEFCE (2008) highlights a range of employer perspectives:

- The most significant thing employers seek is *value for money*. They want a return on their investment and to be able to identify and define it. If HE is to provide learning and training service products that employers want, it needs to highlight HE impacts on productivity and performance and a commercial

business-like approach. Currently this is not as generally available as employers would want.

- HE provision must be closely aligned to the needs of employers, delivered flexibly, perhaps work-based, and through negotiated provision that would link with business need, though they want courses that help improve business performance they don't necessarily want qualifications. Linked in would be clear progression pathways and links with benefits to employers, common approaches to key elements of delivery such as APEL, work-based learning and accreditation of employer training; clearly an HE infrastructure that is financially supported by the state to deliver flexibly and responsively to the workforce would create the professional climate within HE to address such issues.
- Employers identify a number of inhibitors including: financial (costs); credibility (demonstrable value to employer and employee); time (its availability); student support in the workforce; lack of HEI flexibility and responsiveness (too slow, too static); complexity (complicated systems and bureaucracy), lack of relevance and outdated curricula. There is not a common language or understanding. Comments were made on the outdated nature of the curriculum and the processes that support the teaching and learning. Different, and sometimes conflicting, expectations of employer and employee were also noted. A number of respondents also recognised that the unrelenting pressures of change meant employers did not necessarily have time to create a stronger climate of learning in the organisation, and felt HEIs could help.
- Awareness raising and *communication* to understand each other's core business is often required to overcome many of these issues. The business benefit must be clearly articulated in the language of private or public sector 'business', and this must be built on an evidence base of impact. Such a campaign would help develop the right language for conversing across the interface and help create the intelligent knowledgeable demand and supply that this agenda requires.

**5. Barriers faced by universities and colleges in being responsive to employers' needs.** The Department for Universities, Innovation and Skills (2008) indicates ways of avoiding potential barriers including:

- Quality assurance systems which apply to HE provision are fit for purpose;
- Employer-responsive provision is funded appropriately;
- Vocational and work-based learning is valued and supported by providers;
- Academic staff have opportunities to update and refresh their knowledge of industry and the world of work;
- There are clearer routes to enter HE for learners from non-traditional backgrounds;
- Credits and qualifications systems enable students to carry forward credits for prior learning and accumulate qualifications in a flexible way that fits with their work and broader life commitments.

**6. Key interventions for institutions putting in place the processes and infrastructure necessary to enable HE to better respond to an identified workforce development need** (see Haywood and Nixon, 2007):



- Policy analysis and the provision of labour market information;
- Strategic alliances with other HEIs/FECs;
- Alignment of funding regimes and initiatives;
- Central units to support employer engagement activities ;
- Directories of 'expertise' which capture the academic strengths;
- Flexible (and work-based) delivery arrangements
- More responsive validation and quality assurance procedures
- Development funding to incentivise academic staff to engage
- Project management procedures and systems to support client relationship management.

## 7. Putting strategy into practice

The following material is drawn from Council for Industry and Higher Education (2007).

### **Strand A: Flexible lifelong learning: developing responsive provision to meet employer and employee needs**

Develop *credit and qualification frameworks*, and funding methods to promote *flexible learning*; promote the role of HE in FE; *reward* excellence in work-based learning; improve access to *ICT* to support workplace learning; flexible progression routes through *Lifelong Learning Networks*; promotion of better *institutional links* with their graduate alumni to support CPD; expansion of the HE sector's capacity to manage intelligence on *skills issues* (observatory functions).

### **Strand B: Employability: engaging employers in the HE curriculum**

Review support for sandwich placement; promote joint *curriculum development*; support joint working between SSCs and HE; promote high quality learning through work placements; support for graduates traditionally disadvantaged in the labour market, employer satisfaction with graduate skills and qualities; improve *employer understanding of HE*.

### **Strand C: Co-funding partnerships: sharing the costs and benefits of HE**

Test the potential for *co-funded provision*; and develop a funding method which supports it.

### **Strand D: Meeting demand for higher level skills: embedding higher education in the skills infrastructure**

Enhance the contribution of HE to workforce development including through 'Train to Gain' as part of the regional pathfinder projects on higher level skills; develop a strategic relationship between Sector Skills Agreements and institutional and regional planning; promote more effective strategic dialogue on HE skills in the regions; enhance signals from employers to students through *information, advice and guidance*; promote student demand for subjects of higher value to employers.

### **Strand E: Work-based learning: valuing learning undertaken in the workplace**

Consider recommendations from workplace learning research, including development of appropriate *quality assurance methods* to support innovative and customised learning; staff development in workplaces and in HE; work with partners to raise demand for work-based learning; continued expansion of foundation degrees; support for expansion of accreditation of companies' in-house training; support for APEL as part of an HE programme.

## 8. Key issues and challenges of work-based learning

Nixon, *et al.* (2006) outline the following issues and challenges (see pp3-5).

(a) *Overcoming the language barrier* It is critically important to establish a shared understanding of the particular area of focus from both an institution's and employer's perspective, irrespective of the terms used. This will be the first step in establishing a common language.

(b) *Raising demand or expanding provision* When considering any policy interventions to support the HE sector in expanding the nature and extent of work-based learning, allowance must be made for demand side (or employer-related) issues as well. The challenge here is not just about ensuring that the nature and extent of the HE offer meets the needs of employers, but involves motivating employers and individual employees to see value and engage in higher level skills development. Because of this issue we do not, as yet, know enough about the demand from employers and the ability of HEIs to meet that demand. Better intelligence on the nature and extent of provision is required to ensure policy decisions are well grounded.

(c) *Encouraging good pedagogic practice*

(d) *Engaging effectively with employers* Building and sustaining *longer term, closer relationships* between HE and employers will have to underpin any drive by HEIs to expand their role in supporting workforce development. Overcoming *cultural differences* and *language barriers* to establish a shared strategic intention will require *substantial time and effort* on both sides. *Additional resources* will be required.

(e) *Transforming accreditation and quality assurance*

(f) *Meeting the costs of design and delivery* Providing *cost-effective work-based learning solutions* will continue to challenge HEIs wishing to expand their provision in this area and increase their respective market share.

**B. Review of institutional practice to identify examples of HEI guidelines for employer support: a selection of case-studies**

**Example 1:** Name: QAA (2007) *Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education* – Section 9: Work-based and placement learning February 2007

*Key points:*

*Introduction*

16. An effective work-based or placement learning opportunity is one in which the aims and intended learning outcomes are clearly defined and understood by all partners, are integrated into the programme, and where the responsibilities of the awarding institution and the partners are made explicit. Awarding institutions may choose to delegate responsibility for the operational aspects of the programme to a partner, for example an employer or a further education college, but the responsibility for setting any intended learning outcomes, and ensuring that a work-based or placement learning opportunity provides adequate opportunities for them to be achieved, rests with the awarding institution. (p4)

19. The way in which awarding institutions discharge their responsibilities to ensure that work-based or placement learning provides appropriate learning opportunities will vary according to the nature of the work-based or placement learning. In all cases, however, responsibilities should be clear, well documented and understood by all involved, with awarding institutions identifying those aspects over which they retain control. It may be of benefit to involve the partners so that their needs and responsibilities are considered. Where institutions use an agency to secure the work-based or placement learning opportunity, they will need to assure themselves that their responsibilities for the opportunity are being met by the agency. (p5)

*Responsibilities*

3. Awarding institutions have in place policies and procedures to ensure that their responsibilities, and those of their partners, for work-based and placement are met and that learning opportunities provided are appropriate. (p9)
4. Awarding institutions assure themselves that work-based and placement learning providers know what their responsibilities are. (p10)
5. Awarding institutions ensure that students are made aware of their responsibilities and rights throughout their work-based and placement learning. (p10)

### *Information support and guidance*

5. Awarding institutions assure themselves that work-based and placement learning partners are provided with appropriate and timely information prior to and throughout the students' work-based and placement learning. (p12)

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#### **Example 2** University of Derby (case study) in Nixon *et al.* (2006)

*Key points:* Work-based learning is a small but significant part of the University's overall strategy. Interest at a central institutional level has grown to a point where in 2005 a new School (Flexible and Partnership Learning) was set up to demonstrate the institution's commitment and support an increase in work-based learning programmes, although it is unclear what support is available from the employers involved.

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#### **Example 3** University of Leeds (case study) in Nixon *et al.* (2006)

*Key points:* From an employer's perspective it is the institution's ability to diagnose and understand the client's needs that is imperative and staff development may be required in this area. Alongside this, employers would like openness as to the range of possible solutions rather than merely being offered 'off the shelf' programmes. (No mention of employers' support).

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#### **Example 4** Middlesex University (case study) in Nixon *et al.* (2006)

*Key points:*

(a) The institution supports the development of work-based learning in two fundamental ways. The *institution's Corporate Plan* requires that each School incorporates work-based learning into their individual School Plans. In addition, the institution supports the Centre for *Work-based Learning Partnerships (CWBLP)* which supports the development of work-based learning activity across the institution.

(b) The role of CWBLP has been clearly defined as being to extend and embed work-based learning across all Schools in the University. Underpinning this role, the Centre supports *the development of staff* to deliver work-based learning provision – the training needs of staff engaged in this area of learning are assessed through the Appraisal Scheme – and many are undertaking Work-based Learning Masters or Doctorate degrees. It also undertakes *pedagogic research* to support an evidence-based approach to practice, produces *teaching and learning resources*, and supports the *uptake of ICT* in work-based learning.

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#### **Example 5** Northumbria University (case study) in Nixon *et al.* (2006)

*Key points:* (a) Developing an *employers' guide* and website (b) It retains contact with employers, employer organisations and other relevant organisations, as well as *keeping abreast of learning needs* arising from regional strategies and programmes.

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**Example 6:** Open University (case study) in Nixon *et al.* (2006)

**Key points:** Support is provided to students on a number of levels. There is an extensive *ICT system*, personal tutors and mentors. The Open University has also developed a regional *support network and tutorial groups*.

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**Example 7:** University of Portsmouth (case study) in Nixon *et al.* (2006)

**Key points:** (a) *Mentor guidance* to support the professionals in work who support FD students, and research into good practice into FDs (in collaboration with the Higher Education Academy, Foundation Degree Forward and the Centre for Recording Achievement), amongst other initiatives.

(b) Work-based projects designed to address the *employer's needs*, supported by University study on campus, short courses and/or online/distance learning, form the basis of all programmes.

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**Example 8:** Cleveland College of Art and Design (case study) in Nixon *et al.* (2006, p

**Key points:**

- (a) Work-based learning has been sanctioned and supported by the senior management team within the College, whose commitment is evidenced by the creation of a *central HE unit*.
- (b) The unit co-ordinates employer liaison groups to influence and inform programme development, undertakes comprehensive market research to identify and test opportunities, interfaces with the *relevant Sector Skills Councils*, and supports the *internal validation process*.
- (c) The fundamental issue is the difficulty in *matching the divergent needs of employers* with the academic requirements of the validating body, in this instance the University of Teeside.
- (d) The development of close links with employers to inform and contribute to the *institutional curriculum offer* is firmly embedded within the institution.

## C. Conclusions

The overarching impression would seem to be that there is a great deal of workforce development activity underway in the HE sector. Successful collaborations exist (see examples below) with universities being a source of learning, research and innovation, specialist skills, and increased productivity. However, it is clear that the relationship between the supply-side of learning (universities, colleges and so on) and employers remains a complex issue, and there is room for improvement. Efforts by the government to expand the breadth and depth of HE level work-based learning provision must therefore take into account the complexities of the supply and demand equation. It is important to stress that universities (the 'supply' side) see their role beyond regional boundaries – they have a national and international perspective – and some are increasingly focusing on the international dimensions. Yet, the regional dimension has become increasingly the focus for policy interventions to improve skills and productivity (the 'demand' side; see Raddon and Quinn, 2007). A particular challenge here will be for business support and other relevant publicly

funded agencies to motivate employers and individual employees to see value and engage in higher level skills development. (Nixon *et al.*, 2006, p18)

One aspect highlighted by practitioners as being critical to influencing the design of effective work-based learning solutions is that of effectively diagnosing employer needs. Staff development to address this issue and help academic staff who are operating at the interface between higher education and industry, to work as 'consultants' has been identified as an imperative by practitioners and institutions. This is particularly the case in institutions that function on a developed model and lack centralised support (Nixon *et al.*, 2006, p44).

Given this issue, institutions are beginning to establish units to provide centralised support on work-based learning. These units either deliver programmes themselves and/or facilitate outreach to the relevant academic experts who design and deliver the work-based learning solutions to meet the identified student and employer needs. The Work-related Learning Service at Northumbria University, the School of Flexible and Partnership Learning at Derby University, and the Centre for Work-based Learning Partnership at Middlesex University all provide their respective institutions with a focal point of expertise on work-based learning.

The emergence of such centralised support units (in some instances, within academic schools) has, in part, been reliant on the availability of public funding. Funding has been used to reduce the direct cost of programmes to employers – a factor that has enabled institutions to engage the SME sector more effectively (Nixon *et al.*, 2006, p45)

In addition, some institutions have built up their work-based learning provision by transferring the costs of designing and delivering solutions to the employer (and/or individual student) on a full cost recovery basis. Funding remains an important factor in influencing the behaviour of institutions and may militate against any further expansion in this area of provision (Nixon *et al.*, 2006 p45).

Furthermore, building and sustaining longer-term, closer relationships between HE and employers has to underpin any drive to expand higher education's role in supporting workforce development. Overcoming cultural differences and language barriers to establish a shared strategic intent requires substantial time and effort on both sides (Nixon *et al.*, 2006 p50).

From an employer's viewpoint, the CBI (2003) highlighted poor customer service as a main barrier to effective collaboration – an issue that is being addressed by HEIs through the creation of 'front doors' for employers. Employers do not know what is available and in many cases employers do not see HE as a natural provider of learning for their workforce (even at higher levels). Other factors mentioned were the relevance of courses, IPR issues and short-term funding driven initiatives (Nixon *et al.*, 2006 p50).

*Summary of themes in the literature (Table 3.1)*

*(a) Examples of University WBL support and services*

HEIs fund units to provide centralised support for WBL and employer engagement activities e.g.

- Work-related Learning Service ( Northumbria University)
- School of Flexible & Partnership Learning (Derby University)
- Centre for Work-based Learning Partnership (Middlesex University)
- The Employer Engagement Unit (London South Bank University)
- Scottish Centre for WBL (Glasgow Caledonian University)

*(b) Examples of approaches to WBL*

- Student placement
- Commercial and publicly funded WBL through higher education institutions and their business schools
- Commercial and publicly-funded WBL provided by further education colleges on their own or on employers' premises
- WBL in community settings, particularly learning funded directly or indirectly through public funding bodies
- WBL delivered by or through independent learning providers on a commercial basis
- Corporate training provided by companies in their own premises by their own staff or by external contractors.

*(c) Examples of employer support requirements for WBL*

- Staff development
- Development of ICT system
- Development of mentor guidance
- Support network and tutorial groups
- Production of teaching and learning resources
- Employer training offered by the universities
- Development of an employers' guide and website
- Development of WBL partnerships
- Reduction in the direct cost of programmes to employers
- Development of WBL projects designed to address the employer's needs
- Research undertaken by relevant Sector Skills Councils, and support for the internal validation process
- Build up of WBL provision by transferring the costs of designing and delivering solutions to the employer (and/or individual student) on a full cost recovery basis

## Appendix 2: Questionnaire used in the Institutional Survey

### HIGHER EDUCATION ACADEMY FUNDED PROJECT Employer Support for Effective Active Work-based Learning

We are conducting a survey of all UK HEIs to gain a better understanding of the support provided for employers involved in Work-based Learning (WBL). In this context WBL is construed as encompassing a broad spectrum of activity concerned with student learning involving linkages with 'the workplace', including where:

- the HEI places students in the workplace for project work that is integrated with institution-based delivery;
- the student undertakes a period of work with an employer, at an appropriate level and with appropriate briefing and support from their HEI;
- the HEI arranges with the student's current employer for ways to build WBL practices into the workplace.

We would be very grateful if you could answer the following questions, please. Your responses will remain confidential.

1. How would you describe your institution's current engagement with Work-based Learning?

Not at all engaged

A few isolated examples of WBL activity

Well developed WBL activity in a number of areas across the institution

WBL activity clearly embedded across the institution

2. Please give up to three examples of current WBL activity and the discipline in which they are being undertaken within the institution

.....

.....

.....

3. Does your institution have an institutional policy on WBL?

Yes/no/don't know

If so, where is it published?

4. Does your institution have Discipline based policies on WBL?

Yes/no/don't know

If so, in which Discipline areas are these published?

5. Does your institution provide support for employers engaged in WBL?

Yes/no/don't know



If the answer is 'no' or 'don't know', please go to question 9

6. In which discipline areas is employer support provided?

7. What form does this employer support take?

8. Would you be willing to provide examples of any of the policies or employer support mentioned above, please?

Yes/no

If yes, please could you email us the link or forward copies to: Xian Wang (Project Research Assistant), University of Gloucestershire, Dunholme Basement, Park Campus, Cheltenham Gloucestershire, GL50 2RH

E-mail address: [xwang@glos.ac.uk](mailto:xwang@glos.ac.uk)

9. Would you be willing to take part in a short follow-up telephone survey?

Yes/no

If yes, please could you provide your contact details.....

10. On 21st May, 2008 we are holding an Expert Seminar on Work-based Learning and support for Employer involvement. Would you like to receive details of this event?

Yes/No

If yes, where would you like us to send information?

.....

Please tell us a little about your institution and yourself:

Name of HEI.....

Your post and department within the Institution.....

Further information about this project can be found at HE Academy web site

<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/>

Thank you very much for participating in our survey. The collated results will be available on the project website in September 2008.

### Appendix 3: Letter introducing HEI survey

Name of Pro-Vice Chancellor  
Institution Name

January 2008

Dear,

The Leitch Report (2007) highlights the need to develop more effective work-based learning partnerships between HEIs and employers. This represents one of the major challenges for HEIs working to improve student work-based learning.

To this end, we would welcome your institutional participation in a new project entitled '*integrating employers in effective student work-based learning: an evidence base to inform innovative policy and practice*'. The project is funded by the Higher Education Academy and is being led by Professor Lindsey McEwen (Director of the Pedagogic Research and Scholarship Institute), Professor Kris Mason O'Connor (Dean of Teaching and Learning Development) and Christine Williams (Head of Department, the Business School). The project is being run in partnership with Aston University.

The project focuses on evaluating the employer support required for effective active, reflective student learning in Work-based Learning (WBL) environments and in developing stakeholder guidance for employers, students and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The latter will include a web-based guide on 'Employer support for effective active WBL'. In this context WBL is construed as encompassing a broad spectrum of activity concerned with student learning involving linkages with 'the workplace', including where:

- the HEI places students in the workplace for project work that is integrated with institution-based delivery;
- the student undertakes a period of work with an employer, at an appropriate level and with appropriate briefing and support from their HEI;
- the HEI arranges with the student's current employer for ways to build WBL practices into the workplace.

We are keen to ensure that all universities have the opportunity to engage with the project as it progresses. There are two key benefits from so doing:

- Access to innovative web-based resources to guide employers, students and institutions on good practice in supporting effective employer involvement in active reflective WBL. This is a key outcome of the project.
- An opportunity to participate in an Expert Seminar aimed at developing shared understanding of key factors in creating and sustaining successful, active, reflective WBL environments. This will take place on Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2008 at the University of Gloucestershire.

We are seeking to gain an understanding of current policy and practice in relation to HEI support for the employers' role in contributing to successful active WBL environments within the HEI sector. If you are willing to be involved, we would be very grateful if you would complete the questionnaire to be found at the following web address, please. It takes about five minutes to complete.

<http://qmarkweb.glos.ac.uk/q4/perception.dll?name=s9990028?password=s9990028>

We would also like to receive any documents from your University which relate to:

- Institutional policies or guidelines relating to Work-based Learning
- Any material relevant to support for employer involvement in Work-based Learning

As we are requesting this information from all UK HEIs, we recognise that practice will differ from institution to institution as well as possibly within institutions. Therefore, we would be very grateful if you could pass this request on to the appropriate person or persons for a response **by 29th February 2008**.

**All material will be treated confidentially.** Our preference is for electronic copies of the requested documents to be emailed to [xwang@glos.ac.uk](mailto:xwang@glos.ac.uk). However, if electronic copies are not available, hard copies may be sent to Xian Wang, Research Assistant to the project, at the:

Dunholme Basement  
Park Campus  
University of Gloucestershire  
Cheltenham  
Gloucestershire  
GL50 2RH

If you have any queries about involvement with the project, please contact Christine Williams (Project Manager) [cwilliams@glos.ac.uk](mailto:cwilliams@glos.ac.uk). Respondents will be sent a copy of the survey outcome or the project report.

For further information about the WBL project, please see the Higher Education Academy web page: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/research/projects>.

Thank you in advance for helping us make this a successful project.

Yours sincerely

Deputy Vice-Chancellor  
University of Gloucestershire

## Appendix 4: Follow-up email for HEI Survey

Dear...,

### Employer Support for Effective Active Work-based Learning

We sent you an email a few weeks ago, regarding an online questionnaire to request your institutional participation in a new project entitled '*Integrating employers in effective student work-based learning: an evidence base to inform innovative policy and practice*'. The project is funded by the Higher Education Academy and is being run in partnership with Aston University.

We do not appear to have received a response from you (or your institution) and we would really appreciate it if you are able to complete the questionnaire (or pass it on to someone else who can do so), please.

You may use the link below to access the questionnaire :

<http://qmarkweb.glos.ac.uk/q4/perception.dll?name=s9990028?password=s9990028>

Please press the 'submit' button at the end of the questionnaire once you have completed it.

Very many thanks for your help with completing the online questionnaire and contributing to the project and please accept our apologies for this email if you have already responded.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you require further information.

We are looking forward to receiving your completed questionnaire.

Yours sincerely,

## Appendix 5: Focus Group Protocol

### HEA Work-based Learning (WBL) project Focus Group Protocol

#### Introduction

The theme of the project is to explore the support required by employers from HEIs for the effective support of WBL students. Central to the research element of the project are a number of focus groups which will take place between mid February 2008 and the end of March 2008 to represent each of the partners in the project. These partners are the University of Gloucestershire which is rurally based and in the 'new' university sector and the University of Aston which is an urban university from the 'old' university sector. Four focus groups will be held at each of the partner institutions to represent the perspectives shown below.

#### Focus group perspectives

The focus groups will be conducted to explore three different perspectives on WBL and will be selected as shown below:

- Two groups of six to eight students at different levels and in different discipline areas currently or recently engaged in WBL *to identify their perspectives on the most effective practice in terms of employer support for their learning;*  
(student respondents would be asked for their course details, level of study, length of work experience, nature of work undertaken and type of organisation where they undertook work experience).
- One group of six to eight regional employers for both universities from different sectors, scales of enterprise urban/rural settings diversity of workforce. These focus groups will identify support required by employers from HEIs *to enable them to most effectively support students in WBL as well as establishing employers' general needs in relation to WBL;*  
(employer respondents would be asked type of organisation, number of employees, involvement in WBL, number of students for WBL in a typical year)
- One group of six to eight staff with responsibility for facilitating WBL in a range of discipline areas inter alia geography, health and social care, business, creative arts, education, sport *to identify the most effective ways that employers can support WBL student learning.*  
(staff respondents would be asked about nature of their role/involvement in relation to WBL e.g. course designer, visiting tutor in WBL)

#### Focus group process

The planned time for each group will be one hour and 10 minutes (i.e. 10 minute introduction followed by one hour focus group).

Location: at the institution local to the group.

Focus groups to take place in a quiet, comfortable private space (e.g. classroom) free from interruptions.

Refreshments to be provided.

Each group to be facilitated by two members of the project team; the Project researcher will attend all focus groups accompanied by one other team member from the Institution from which the group is drawn (in the case of staff and students).

Each group to be tape recorded.

Each group to receive standard introductory briefing covering: purpose of research; process for the FG, including the broad areas for discussion (see project brief for details); what will happen after the group; what will happen to the data; seeking permission to approach individual member(s) after the FG to follow up any particular points raised within the discussion for the purpose of digital story telling; confidentiality; giving participants an opportunity to opt out should they wish to.

Tapes to be transcribed by a third party, preserving the anonymity of the participants. Transcriptions of FG to be confirmed by focus group members.

The Researcher will be the 'keeper of the data' arising from the focus groups and will undertake the preliminary analysis to identify key themes. Members of the project team will participate in the data analysis and interpretation.

## Digital Stories

Permission will be sought from focus group participants to work with them individually to record digital stories. Same 'ground rules' as above in respect of confidentiality, permissions, etc.

## Key themes for Focus Groups

General questions

How have you been involved (as a student/employer/HEI) in work-based learning?

What is your experience of work-based learning?

Examples of good experience and why

Examples of bad experiences and why.

|           |
|-----------|
| Employers |
|-----------|

- *to enable them to most effectively support students in WBL as well as establishing employers' general needs in relation to WBL;*

What links do you have with HEIs in the context of work-based learning?  
(individual staff links, central services or discipline based)

What practical support are you expecting from HEIs?

If HEIs could do one thing to help you or your organisation improve engagement with them, what would that be?

*(Prompts)*

*How can HEIs support you in preparing students in terms of 'being able to do the job'?*

*What do you, as an employer, really value (and will therefore be willing to pay for from WBL?).*

|          |
|----------|
| Students |
|----------|

- *to identify their perspectives on the most effective practice in terms of employer support for their learning;*

What made work-based learning effective or ineffective for you and why in terms of employer support for your learning?

*(Prompts)*

*From your first hand experience, what do you think were the most effective practices, in terms of employer support, for your learning in the workplace? (good practice)*

*In terms of improvement what would be the most effective practice in terms of employer support for your learning in the workplace? (enhancement of the experience)*

*What could your university do to sufficiently equip you for work experience to meet the needs of employers in the work place?*

|       |
|-------|
| Staff |
|-------|

- *to identify the most effective ways that employers can support WBL student learning.*

What practical support could HEIs provide to help employers in WBL?

*(Prompts)*

*How could employers be more fully engaged with HEIs in the process of delivering WBL?*

*How could staff in HEIs develop their awareness of work practices to support their students and the needs of employers?*

*What support is required to prepare students to understand the principle of reflective practice before they begin work experience?*

*What are the issues surrounding the funding of WBL from your perspective?*

## Appendix 6: Informed consent form for focus group participants

### Informed Consent: What is this project about?

The theme of the project is to explore the support required by employers from HEIs for the effective support of WBL students. This research is part of a larger study being undertaken by University of Gloucestershire.

### Who is conducting the project?

This research is being undertaken by the Aston University. Focus groups will be organised by Christine Williams and Lily Wang. Christine is contactable on [cwilliams@glos.ac.uk](mailto:cwilliams@glos.ac.uk) if you have any queries about this research.

### If I take part what will it involve?

You will be asked broad questions about your experiences whilst undertaking work-based learning (including short term projects within a work place or professional placements). The focus group will consist of a facilitator and about six to eight participants. The focus group will be tape recorded, with your permission, and should last around one hour, depending on how much you and the group have to say. Only the focus group facilitator and the external transcription service will hear the focus group in its entirety and under no circumstance will your name or any identifying information about you be included in the reporting of this research. As this is a group-based discussion it is important to emphasize confidentiality within the group – you may talk in general terms about the discussion elsewhere, but please do not reveal any personal information or details about colleagues to individuals outside the group.

### Confidentiality of Information

All consent forms will be kept confidential and stored in a locked filing cabinet. The focus group will be transcribed (typed-up) and the anonymised transcript stored securely by the lead researcher at the University of Gloucestershire. Once the focus group had been transcribed the tape will be destroyed. You will remain anonymous; any identifiable information, such as your name, or age will be excluded from the transcript and any reports or publications to follow. You will be given a pseudonym (false name) which will be used on all project documentation. Any further information, such as age, gender and employment status will be recorded against your pseudonym and will therefore remain anonymous.

### Volunteer's Statement

I have read and understood the above explanation. I have had the opportunity to discuss it with the focus group facilitator and to ask any questions. Before we begin the focus group it is important to emphasise that:

- Your participation is entirely voluntary
- You are free to refuse to answer any question
- You are free to withdraw from the focus group at any time
- You can retrospectively withdraw your data from the project within two weeks of the date of this focus group.

I agree to take part in the above project and I give my permission for the focus group to be audio-tape recorded. Upon signing below, I will receive a copy of the consent form.

Name:..... Signed:

..... Date: .....



## **Appendix 7a: Transcripts of the Digital Stories – Employer Voices**

### **Story 1a: ‘Effective employer engagement’ theme**

What I like is to feel that our company is a partner with the college; after all we’re in a fairly small town. Being a partner, in my view would include working on the design of the course, not just being on the receiving end. That way our company would feel part of things and could really help the student. The other thing is that the course could meet our needs better.

### **Story 2a: ‘Effective HEI staff engagement’ theme**

What puzzles me is that I want to support the student both for his or her sake and also to get the best out of them for my company but it’s a mystery to me about what the university’s role is. I’m paying the student and they may be paying fees to the university, I don’t know. What I do know is that the tutors from the various universities seem to do very different things when they come here – if they come here. Some let me and the student know in advance and we can plan a meeting about the student’s progress; others just seem to turn up or say did you get the email I sent yesterday? (I get about 100 a day).

### **Story 3a: ‘Effective student engagement’ theme**

In order to engage with the workplace, students need to be willing to develop a range of skills. They need to be more prepared to be problem solvers for example and to be flexible in the way they work. They need to be flexible in a range of ways. Because we are located all over the country students can’t always stay in the area where they’ve gone to university or wherever they are from. So we do say “we’d like you to be flexible and you could be based anywhere’....it’s just trying to get that across that at this stage in their lives they should be flexible as they might get something out of it – to think outside the box.

### **Story 4a: ‘Ensuring communication’ theme**

I would think more regular more formal process for us to actually talk to each other as it’s very ad hoc and it’s usually down to me calling the university or them calling me if they need a question answered but maybe have a regular **checkpoint** even it’s just once every two months just a quick half hour with that person to catch up about what’s happening at our organisation or happening in yours and just talk through any things that have come up.

### **Story 5a: ‘Managing expectations’ theme**

In order to provide the best possible learning experience for the student I do need to know what is expected of the student and what is expected from me. I also need to know what support I can expect from the university. I think I know what’s expected, but given the rate of change both in my

organisation, and presumably in higher education these expectations do need to be made explicit. Then we all know what we've signed up for.

### **Story 6a: 'Exploring value' theme**

The main thing for us – the students come in pretty new to the world of work and you see by the end of the year how they've actually progressed and gained in confidence, communication skills and it just makes them so much more employable. It has to be said that we have a commercial interest in getting the right student here. We are not a charity. It would be good to have a clear dialogue with the university about our needs and to see if we can dovetail. When I say our needs, often it's just having someone with the right attitude, keen to learn and flexible and willing to learn not necessarily having the precise technical skill.

## **Appendix 7b: Transcripts of the Digital Stories – Student Voices**

### **Story 1b: ‘Effective employer engagement’ theme**

I cannot believe that my placement year is already finished. It is very difficult to summarize all what I have experienced over the last year. Above all, it was an exciting opportunity that allowed me to interact with people from different backgrounds, to boost my confidence, and to apply some of the knowledge I have learnt during my course.

As a business student what I wanted the most was to put into practice my management skills. However, my work experience did not completely fulfil this expectation because I would have liked a greater level of responsibility. Do not get me wrong, I do not regret my choice of work placement at all. It gave me the chance to see how a company operates on a day to day basis and to understand the sort of skills required to make things happen.

If I had had the extra autonomy and responsibility I wanted, this would have been the best experience of my degree. The person I had to refer to was always telling me what I had to do. He was very supportive but at the same time he would not allow me to take my own initiative. He would remark what I was allowed to do. I believe he was worried that he would get in trouble if I took a wrong decision. If I was unmotivated he would say keep it simple you do not want to upset people. I do feel he never understood I wanted to be more involved and to contribute to the development of the company. In spite of this, it was definitely a positive experience overall. I would recommend this experience without hesitation to any one that asks. I am sad to a degree it is over but now I cannot wait to start my career after graduation. I have learnt great deals about my self, about the kind of worker I am, about my aspirations and about what I can achieve.

### **Story 2b: ‘Effective HEI staff engagement’ theme**

I have finally finished my year work placement! That is not to say that I have not enjoyed it or learned a huge amount of things. I really have but there comes a time when returning to being a student is amazing, potentially the best thing about taking a year in industry.

My placement has been based at a food manufacture based in Cornwall. I was put in a technical role based within Quality Assurance, it was my responsibility (along with many others) to ensure that the product going out the door complied with all legal requirements, that it was ‘food safe’ and that it was of the quality that our customers expected. I fit very well with the job and soon I ended up managing the Quality Assurance team. The team consisted of eight members of staff, across a variety of shifts, with different backgrounds and experience in years ranging from four to 20; I knew it wasn’t going to be easy!

I was working 10 hour days and I was doing it alright but I had pressure from getting the University essay in and that is what the year was marked on not the fact that I was doing a very challenging and demanding job. I felt a bit undervalued by the University – like they do not give enough

importance to what you do on placement as long as you get the report done. I had two visits; the first one was with somebody I did not know so from my point of view saying there was a problem it would have been difficult to resolve; the second one was with somebody I did know but it was two weeks before I left and to check I had done the learning outcomes.

In spite of a few lows, my year has been really enjoyable – I have loved having a year out from University, time to earn some money and live in the real world. A year placement is massively important and necessary to know where to go next in life.

### **Story 3b: 'Effective student engagement' theme**

Looking back over the year and the feeling is overall positive. I worked and lived in Devon for a year. It was great to live somewhere different from Cheltenham. Sometimes, you need to get away from the things that you know in order to either appreciate what you have or to get a new perspective on your life. Being away from my home town gave me a sense of independence, freedom, and responsibility that I had previously not experienced in my life. It made me re-evaluate my life, and my priorities were definitely re arranged – you really do realise what is most important to you.

I worked for the tourism industry and was involved in many different tasks. I got the most of an experience that helped to boost my confidence. To improve my skills I asked managers to give me more tasks when I did not have much to do. I wanted to know what I was able to achieve. The only low point was that I did not get the feedback I wanted. I would have liked to receive the same performance appraisal as the rest of employees. I thought if I am part of the company I should have received it. It was not until the end of my placement that one of the managers said I have done a great job. I believe that if I had that feedback earlier my levels of involvement and commitment with the company would have been higher. I am the sort of person that needs to be motivated to perform at my best.

Overall, I am extremely glad I chose to go to Devon for my placement year. It still does not feel like it is actually over, and I genuinely miss my lifestyle out there. I made friends for life, as well as gaining experience and contacts in the industry which will be invaluable to me throughout my career.

### **Story 4b: 'Ensuring communication' theme**

My work experience has had its ups and downs but definitely a positive experience overall. Being busy most of the time made the year go very fast. To give you an idea; I have designed and implemented some new office processes 'managing change' related to that; I have visited operational sites; I have been part of the business development team for four different major contract bids; I have got to understand the accountancy practices of the company and gained some responsibilities in that; and I have been part of the project team that was planning our move to a new office.

One of the problems I faced was that nobody had told my manager I was allowed some time off to do the essay. Even though my tutor stated I had the right to take two days to write the essay my boss told me I had to take time out of my own annual leave. That was a bit disappointing as the University had put it in the booklet. My tutor from University came up once during Christmas closure when there were about three people in the office and he never got a chance to speak to my actual boss. It was a quick visit and I never got the chance to show him all what I was doing. There were no contacts as far as I was aware between the University and my boss apart from a single visit.

In spite of a few problems I would not hesitate to recommend a placement. What I have experienced will undoubtedly help my career development. I will miss greatly the people I work with and hope that I will have a similar working environment in my next job. Some of the ups were that I met lots of new people who I learnt a lot from; I also had the opportunity to put some of the things I learned at University into practice; and I was encouraged to use independent thought.'

### **Story 5b: 'Managing expectations' theme**

I had not initially planned to come to University, and so worked for a few years in tedious and frustrating jobs. Finally, I realized that I needed to go to University and further my education. Events management seemed to be what I was looking for. With that in mind I chose Marketing Management because I wanted to keep a number of doors open and it fits well with events too.

Being an organised person helped me to get through the course without any problems and to enjoy some of my lectures. The first two years flew and the placement year was around the corner. My placement was in a local marketing company that represents a few well known beverage, cereal and chocolate brands.

My levels of expectations were very high as I thought I would be involved in the sort of work I liked and I would have the chance to apply the theory learnt over the course. However, the job waiting for me was not what I had expected. I ended up most of the time loading data for a computer programme called SAP. Definitely, this was not the sort of task I was looking for.

I believe that employers should get representatives to come to the University and to describe in full the type of company they work for and what they want from students and what sort of job students will be assigned. This would help to ensure that students are allocated in those companies that offer the kind of jobs students like. I am sure that companies would prefer students that can add something to the business rather than a person frustrated for having to do something he does not like.

### **Story 6b: 'Exploring value' theme**

As I had never worked for a big company I felt a combination of anxiety and nerves. Luckily, all the stress disappeared once I fit very well in the role I

was assigned. From the beginning of the placement my manager was both very comprehensive and supportive. This helped to boost my confidence and to take the initiative of suggesting my own ideas within the marketing department.

The best of my placement was being around specialists and seeing how the managers work. Looking at what managers were doing helped me to understand why things were done in a certain way. It was a great chance to see how the theoretical stuff that you learn in the first and second year can be put into practice. Of particular interest for me was to see how managers organise their work load. I learned to prioritise tasks and to manage time and to really plan stuff. Being a disorganised person, this was one of the ups of my work.

I feel that I have learnt more this year than in the previous two years of my degree. It is much easier to understand certain things at the work place. I feel like being involved in practical tasks helped me to understand the complexities of a business. I am sure that if I had not gone on placement I would have never achieved the level of understanding that I have now. My placement was a life changing experience and it was worth more than the mark I got from the essay that I had to write.

## **Appendix 7c: Transcripts of the Digital Stories – HEI Staff Voices**

### **Story 1c: ‘Effective employer engagement’ theme**

It’s absolutely critical for us to engage employers, not just because employer engagement is high on the government agenda with the Leitch report etc. Rather it’s about ensuring our students have a good placement experience as well as their employees who are working for them and registered on a course with us. There are different sorts of WBL nowadays. One way to engage employers could be to involve them in the design of the course and inviting them to meet students here at the university for other activities, give talks, lead discussion etc. Then it is win win all round.

### **Story 2c: ‘Effective HEI staff engagement’ theme**

One of the areas where employers need support is in understanding learning outcomes from a work placement and how these might differ from a first year student and a third year undergraduate or a final undergraduate and taught postgraduate in terms of the tasks undertaken while in the workplace. I supervised one placement where the nature of the work available for the taught postgraduate student changed during the student’s placement. The student had been supposed to be doing work that involved advanced problem solving skills and a critical reflection on business planning. When a change occurred in timing of the business’s plans, the student ended up doing work that was much more routine like database entries and answering telephone queries. This might have been because the business involved was small and less flexible in its delivery. We did all we could to communicate the needs of the placement at the time and set additional work but it still led to an unsatisfactory learning experience for the student. The external examiner also commented less positively on the nature of the work relative to the level of the student.

### **Story 3c: ‘Effective student engagement’ theme**

Students do seem to get engaged in being active at the work place. They might do a lot, but they need to take time to reflect on what they are doing, what they have learned. Even the least promising placement can provide excellent learning opportunities just as long as the student is prepared to reflect. It’s our job to help them with knowing how to reflect critically before they start their placement. This would also involve how to use that reflection to improve their practice. Its not just doing it is reflecting on what you and others are doing for the future. Also we need to involve the employers in encouraging students to reflect in the workplace. This might be through creating opportunities for confidential discussion with someone not directly involved in line managing their work or encouraging them to keep a learning journal and for the employer to show interest in the main points that the student has learnt.

#### **Story 4c: 'Ensuring communication' theme**

From my discussion with employers about how to enable students to get the best out of their placements – it's **communication, communication, communication!** I'm not saying there is one right way, but it's vital to set up a clear system. Otherwise how can the employers support the students if they don't know who to contact here in the university who will give a timely and helpful response?

#### **Story 5c: 'Managing expectations' theme**

Having been a lecturer here for many years, I've noticed that employer expectations have changed. Once they seemed glad to just have another pair of hands to do a specific task. Now students and HEIs want more – the whole workplace learning experience – and employers need to know more than ever what is expected of them. Students are not just another pair of hands!! Now some employers are involved in writing reports, for example, on the student's progress and they need to know whether it will be part of the student's assessment. They need to be clear what the expectation is of the students' learning and the course so that they can provide enough challenge. One of the worst things is a shy but able student who gets humdrum things to do because that's all the employer expects they can do.'

It's impossible to be able to please all employers all of the time... I did my annual survey and got about 400 responses back from employers and some loved the support that we give to them. You know 'best in class'; 'you do a superb job', 'we really appreciate the tutor support briefing pack' etc. Then other employers will say 'there's not enough support'....employers would sometimes like more guidance from us (the HEIs). I think they want to know what they're expected to do with students. They want to know what level of contact to have with them that sort of stuff... So there's almost a case then for saying therefore that support needs to be tailored to the individual needs of every employer who recruits students into WBL situations and then once again where does our role start and end?

#### **Story 6c: 'Exploring value' theme**

I think value can mean many different things. But to me it's the value to the student of building their capacity to learn on the job. For students to get the most value, however they do need to be able to link theory and practice, what we do here in the university with what they do in the employment. Also to be of value we as staff need to ensure the curriculum is really up to date and not lagging behind what they will be encountering at work.