

A Case Study in the Development of a Work-Based Learning and the Possibility of Transfer to Continental European Universities: The WBIS program at the University of Chester, England

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Introduction

Over the last 20 years in the U.K., there have been a number of educational developments designed to take higher education out of the classroom and institution, and into the lives of adults in the workplace (Nixon, Smith, Stafford, & Camm, 2006). At one level, this is part of a broader objective that aims to engage an increasing section of the population in continuing lifelong learning – that is, continuing formal learning throughout a person's life rather than ending at some predetermined point (Field, 2006). It also is an attempt to extend the mission of universities beyond the traditional teaching of full-time undergraduates and carrying out research, with the likely result of increasing revenue in the process.

In order to meet the learning needs of adults, many of the fundamental assumptions of traditional education and delivery models have had to be rethought. These include assumptions about the nature of knowledge and the mechanisms for learning. In addition to these academic issues have come a series of institutional, administrative and cultural challenges. In this paper, the rationale for change and the means for achieving it are described. Many of the theories of learning discussed here are widely understood to provide the basis for alternative forms of provision (recent examples include theories by Malloch, Cairns, Evans & O'Connor [2011] and Illeris [2011]), but there has been less translation of these ideas into practical programs for delivery. As a result, the literature is notably thinner on the pedagogic and organizational challenges presented by what amounts to an alternative higher education paradigm. In the U.K., a number of universities have attempted to develop alternatives, but these are mostly small scale (Lester & Costley, 2010). The University of Chester is one of the larger providers, along with the universities of Derby and Middlesex.

The Development of Work-Based Learning at Chester

The University of Chester in North West England was founded in 1839 as a theological and teaching college, principally focused upon the teaching of full-time undergraduate students rather than being a research-intensive university. Since the 1980-1981 academic year, all full-time undergraduates at Chester pursuing non-vocational degrees have undertaken some form of learning in the workplace as part of their studies. For the first decade, this was undertaken on a pass-fail basis, with no credits awarded. To expand this model, outside help was sought and a small government grant was awarded in 1990-1992, which drew upon the expertise of the Learning from Experience Trust.¹

The trust was created and led by Norman Evans, a practitioner rather than a theorist, who did much to spread interest in the idea that learning occurs directly from experience in all spheres of life and not just in formal educational settings. He also believed such learning can be captured and translated into formal academic credit. The first cohort to receive academic credit for experiential learning in the workplace was in 1991, when 25 students completed this process, called the Work Based Learning module. Since 1996, all students at Chester pursuing nonvocational degrees have been required to undertake some form of experiential learning with the

majority opting for the Work Based Learning module.

A second model of experiential workplace learning was developed in 1998, this time for adults in the workplace who did not attend the university. From the outset, the needs of part-time adult learners were recognized to be significantly different from full-time, traditional-aged undergraduates. The new framework, Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS), was created with the adult learners' specific requirements in mind. The WBIS is an example of what is termed a work-based learning (WBL) "shell framework" – a validated degree that enables adult learners to negotiate an award title and program of learning tailored to their individual needs within the workplace. The main equivalent to WBIS in the U.K. is the Work Based Learning Framework at the University of Middlesex and the discontinued Learning through Work program at the University of Derby (Minton, 2007).

Experiential Learning in the WBIS Program

Academic pathways within WBIS are negotiated either for individual students or cohorts, as are award titles. Award titles also indicate a WBIS award; for example, a student may obtain a "Bachelor of Arts in Leadership in Health Services (WBIS)" or "Master of Arts in Urban Regeneration Practice (WBIS)." Learners, therefore, complete programs of study and receive award titles relevant to their practice requirements. Within their programs of study, students are permitted to obtain academic credit for previous learning achievements, both formal (certificated) and informal (experiential). University regulations at Chester allow an award to be conferred where up to two-thirds of the credit requirement can be obtained through the accreditation of prior learning (APL).² APL can be awarded in two ways. The first, accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL), is permissible where a student has an existing current academic qualification (obtained within the previous five years) of the same level and in an area relevant to the planned WBIS award. Awarding credit in such circumstances is fairly straightforward, following checks on the veracity of the claim.

In other circumstances, the second way that students can make claims on the basis of experiential learning is through the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL). In turn, APEL claims can be made in three sets of circumstances. The first is when students hold a formal qualification that is not current; they can make a claim based upon a demonstration of how formal knowledge inherent in the qualification has been applied in practice. A second way of obtaining credit via an APEL claim is when a student holds an unaccredited qualification that nonetheless has content relevant to higher education, which might be the case with a qualification provided by a corporation. The third way is when a student has no existing qualification but has a wealth of practical experience to draw upon, which lends itself to higher-level study and analysis.

In each of the examples cited above, an award of credit is made after the student provides evidence of the basis for their claim, accompanied by a reflective review for up to half the word count for an assignment for the volume of credit sought. In other words, Chester utilizes a "developmental" approach to the awarding of credit for past learning rather than a simple "credit exchange" (Butterworth, 1992). For example, an APEL claim for 40 credits (20 credits ECTS [European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System]) would involve the writing of a reflective review of up to 5,000 to 6,000 words – half that for the award of credit for new learning. The reflective review itself must follow generic-level descriptors for the award and demonstrate familiarity with and the application of relevant academic literature. The reflective reviews follow a prescribed format in which the basis for the claim is described and the experience is analyzed with reference to leading, authoritative academic and professional literature as the basis for reflective thinking about planned future actions. As with any claims for past experiential learning, an academic judgment has to be made on the volume of experiential learning the student has so that it can be translated into an appropriate award of academic credit. As a rule of thumb, the more experienced a student is and the greater the level of responsibility they have in the workplace, the greater potential for making an APEL claim. Claims based purely upon experience require students to submit a portfolio of evidence bound together with the reflective review of that experience. When assessing such submissions, tutors concentrate on the reflective review, as this represents the learning from experience rather

than the content of the portfolio, which is present mainly for verification and reference. Assessment for claims of experiential learning on past actions is on a pass-fail basis only.

In addition to awarding credit for past experiential learning, WBIS also allows students to obtain credit for new, purpose-designed experiential learning in either single, double or triple modules, known as “Negotiated Experiential Learning Modules” (NELMs). With the help of tutors, students identify workplace projects for a specific volume of credit and are then assessed. Specific learning outcomes, intended outcomes, learning resources and so on are therefore negotiated with the student using a standard template – a Negotiated Experiential Learning Agreement (NELA) adapted for the specific project. As part of their assignment, especially for larger 60 credit NELMs, students are encouraged to produce workplace artefacts, typically reports, as the basis for action. These can be submitted as part of the word count but are not assessed by tutors. As products of practice knowledge, the value of the workplace artifacts is assessed by practitioners rather than academics. The submitted reflective review on the project will include a description of the project, an analysis informed by the relevant literature and a summary of the learning that is the basis for actions in the future. As with all other assignments, standard academic conventions on referencing and other matters are expected. The assessment of new experiential learning is graded in the same way as any other module.

The use of experiential learning in WBIS constitutes the “Work Based” part of the title of the program. Although experiential learning forms the bedrock of WBIS, it has always been recognized that experiential learning alone does not always meet the learning needs of students. Students are, therefore, able to study traditional subject disciplines where these are relevant to their needs, such as project management, leadership, finance and any other number of specialist subject requirements. When they do so, learning is often informed by their own experiences. For example, assignments for subject modules such as project management will often incorporate the students’ experiential learning. The combination of knowing from experience with more formal varieties of knowledge is what explains the reference to “integration” in the WBIS title. Although essentially an experiential learning program, it is integrated with more formal ways of knowing. An important aspect of the distinctive pedagogy of WBIS is the dialogue between the real, lived experience of students and abstracted conceptions of the world.

Facilitating Learning in WBIS

The WBIS tutors have always believed that for students to analyze their experiences solely on untutored introspection is not enough. Students also are required to read relevant literature as in any other university program. The difficulty is that unlike a subject-discipline approach where it is possible for a tutor to provide a standard reading list for all students, the individualized, contextualized and situated approach in WBIS means that no experiential learning module begins with a set reading list. In workplace projects, there are often issues related to organizational design, culture, leadership and so on, but precisely knowing where the boundaries are is difficult to conceive. In addition to standard academic sources, students may refer to internal organizational documents, those produced by professional and trade bodies, government and so on. There may be other sources of information that are entirely practice-based and tacit, but also are important. Facilitating learning, therefore, requires both highly skilled tutoring and a willingness on the part of students to develop an ability to teach themselves and to become autonomous learners. To assist with this, students are allocated to tutors with relevant specialist knowledge. The program also incorporates modules at the outset of the program, which are designed to sensitize students to their learning needs and preferences, their academic skills and the ability to learn reflectively.

Accompanying this pedagogic method has been a commitment to placing the needs of the learner before administrative convenience wherever possible. WBIS students can register and complete their studies flexibly within guidelines designed to ensure progression. They are able to complete short awards (for example, a professional certificate or diploma) that they can, if they wish, build up into bachelor’s and master’s awards (a full award). Payment is flexible so that students can progress on a pay-per-module basis if they wish. As a

result of these practices and curricula tailored to their needs, WBIS has, without any significant help from the rest of the university, managed to increase its student numbers by approximately 20 percent every year since 1998 and continues to grow even in the current financially difficult climate. Over time, the practice has spread into other parts of the university, so that many WBIS pathways, and hence students, are located in other faculties.

The rest of this paper describes how the program operates and assesses some of the difficulties integrating a radical program within a conventional university setting.

The WBIS Program: Summary of the Principal Features

The five key features of WBIS are flexibility, learner focus, negotiability, autonomous learning and application. *Flexibility* is manifest in the ability of students to begin and progress study at times convenient to them, within the overall framework of the university's regulations for progression and completion. Flexibility also is evident in enabling students to progress on a "pay-per-module" basis and work at times and places convenient to them. Flexibility in learning enables students to incorporate workplace learning into their accredited program of study, change their program where circumstances change and so on.

Closely allied to the notion of flexibility is the *focus on learners* and *autonomous learning*. As the starting point in WBIS, no assumptions are made about curriculum and subject or the needs of the learner. Therefore, there is no timetable of lectures or day release from one's workplace; instead there is a program of workplace workshops, individually negotiated tutorials, and e-learning. Students are able to determine the focus of their learning and are free to incorporate transdisciplinary experiential learning as well as more traditional subject-based modules into their program. The emphasis on individualized learning requires students to accept far greater responsibility for their learning than in conventional, essentially didactic programs, and to develop the necessary ability to learn in this way at the outset of the program.

WBIS students *negotiate* their award title and program of learning within the WBIS framework (referred to as their "learning pathway"), whether as an individual or part of a cohort. This enables the precise tailoring of learning to student needs. The starting point in WBIS is the individual or cohort, not subject discipline. Because all awards exist within the WBIS framework, it is possible for students to negotiate their award title and learning pathway, which must be congruent, without the need for a revalidation. Students can register for short awards such as a professional certificate (30 ECTS credits at levels 4, 5 and 6) and stack credits progressively. Many students only require such short awards; for example, a popular award is the postgraduate certificate (30 ECTS credits at level 7). Many midcareer professionals find themselves assuming managerial responsibilities, yet have no formal management qualifications, and this short award helps to provide just that. Another example is that the university has developed a postgraduate certificate for those in higher education who wish to facilitate WBL and require some formal learning in the area. WBIS awards are available at all levels in higher education, from National Qualifications Framework (NQF)³ levels 4 to 7. A separate program enables senior practitioners to obtain a transdisciplinary professional doctorate.

The final important feature of WBIS is *application*. Assignments, as long as they meet the learning outcomes, are negotiable based upon generic examples relevant to the level of learning. The aim is to create learning outcomes that are integrated with workplace practice. They are either *work-based* ("I have done/am doing something and wish to study it formally") or *work-related* ("I need to study something formally, I intend to do something and it will be useful to develop more contextual knowledge about what I do"). Assignments can be based around projects in the workplace, therefore transdisciplinary, or involve reflective learning in a particular subject, such as project management. A typical work-based WBIS module involves the student reflecting upon experience of doing by reading authoritative literature. The reflective process is designed to enable the individual to alter practice in response to informed, reflective thinking. The purpose of assignments is therefore not to impart disembodied, universal knowledge but to generate situated knowledge as the basis for

action. Unlike conventional programs where students demonstrate their knowing, WBIS students also are expected to demonstrate how knowing leads to change and doing. We like to say WBIS students “generate knowledge at the point of consumption.”

WBIS in Practice: Devising Learner Pathways and Tutor Practice

At the start of the WBIS process, students are allocated a personal academic tutor (PAT) who guides them through the process. Most students complete a module entitled “Self-Review and Negotiation of Learning.” The module requires the student to review their personal development to date, their current workplace role, and from this, develop a rationale for their intended learning pathway and award title. This is formally recorded and assessed for relevance, accuracy and coherence by the whole program team. At this stage consideration is given as to whether the student is able to make any claims for prior learning. University regulations enable a named award to comprise of up to two-thirds of total credits for the accreditation of prior certificated learning (APCL) or the accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) as previously described.

As part of the same module, students are introduced to the idea of reflective learning and undertake a reflective review, usually of some sort of critical incident. The choice of modules students complete on their learning pathway is virtually limitless and is only really bound by the ability of the university to provide underpinning subject expertise. Students can complete current experiential learning modules on workplace projects, as previously described, either as single, double or triple modules using customized learning outcomes and module descriptors. Alternatively, students can study some of the many modules WBIS tutors have developed over the years in response to demand; or they can study any accredited module at the university, provided it is at the appropriate level; or students can study new modules, which can be accredited as need arises.

Because of the need to develop modules for clients, the university has created a committee to scrutinize the accreditation of new modules called the “WBIS Approval Panel.” The panel has scheduled monthly meetings and is comprised of senior members of the university and quality assurance specialists. The panel scrutinizes and approves new modules and pathways specifically created for employers in co-delivery arrangements. Over the course of time, there have been a large number of accredited WBIS modules developed. WBIS students are therefore presented with an almost limitless menu of learning options. They can make APL claims for credit; they can negotiate and complete experiential modules based upon workplace projects; and they can complete generic WBIS modules, such as “project management” or ones developed specifically for their own needs or other clients such as the Foundation for Government program developed for the U.K. government with a strong emphasis on vocational learning. In addition, they can study modules elsewhere in the university, provided that these are cognate and at the appropriate level. If none of these options suit the student, new modules can be delivered that are precisely tailored to their needs.

Most WBIS students begin their studies with the Self-Review module, and at this point, students negotiate their program with their tutor. The negotiation involves selecting appropriate modules, the order in which they will be studied, submission dates and their qualification title. The choice is not arbitrary, but is on the basis of a reasoned self-analysis of learning achievements and requirements. As part of the process, students complete what is known as an approved studies learning agreement (ASLA), which is a type of learning contract. The ASLA indicates what the student will study and when and, following independent scrutiny by all WBIS tutors, is sent to the registry function of the university. The ASLA indicates how many credits of APL will be claimed and the balance of negotiated experiential learning modules and/or other modules. Students registering for a bachelor’s degree are only required to indicate their pathway for one level at a time, not all three. The ASLA also includes planned submission dates.

Learner autonomy is facilitated by a variety of mechanisms. Students are inducted to prepare them for independent study and are able to call upon the services of a dedicated distance librarian. In addition to individual tutor support, specialist modules have been developed that focus on the development of learning skills, such as

Skills and Approaches for Work Based Learning. Another mechanism is e-learning, used increasingly in recent years, to meet employer expectations (Brown, Murphy, & Wade, 2006). Individual modules are widely supported by dedicated learning materials hosted on a collective e-learning platform called the “WBIS Portal.” Tutors recognize that e-learning alone rarely suits the learning preferences of students (Singh, 2003; Welsh, Wanberg, Brown, & Simmering, 2003; Graff, 2006; Hughes, 2007), so it is usually blended with personal tutorials and workshops. Another important component of the WBIS pedagogic method is the use of formative assessment for all assignments, so that the production of assignments also is a negotiated process (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Students are encouraged to submit plans for their work, as well as full drafts, prior to formal submission, upon which they receive tutor comments within two weeks. Formative assessment usually includes full assignment comments and line-by-line comment boxes. Grammatical irregularities also are highlighted. Tutors have received training in learning disability awareness and full institutional support is available where such disabilities are suspected.

The emphasis on individualized, autonomous learning enables the student to receive more tailored tutor support than is available on most programs. The ability of students to learn autonomously is progressive, so for the most part, they become more proficient as they proceed through their studies. As with any program, student support requirements vary across individuals, so tutor support, like the program itself, is tailored to individual requirements.

Invariably, progression rates vary between individuals. In some cases, this is to do with life events and circumstances such as a change in job, moving house and so on. But the inherent flexibility in WBIS reveals differing levels of motivation to learn between individuals. Student progression – the rate at which they accumulate credit – is a source of constant debate among tutors. In the past, tutor attitudes were more relaxed than they are now. Students have target submission dates on a quarterly basis and are expected to submit a minimum of 60 credits (30 credits ECTS) per calendar year. Monitoring of student progression also is administratively complex, but persistent nonsubmission results in termination of studies, following suitable warnings.

The emphasis on individual tuition and associated practices such as formative assessment may make it appear that WBIS is a relatively costly, and therefore an inefficient delivery mechanism. In the past, this has been a perception elsewhere in the university, but this is not borne out by the facts; staff/student ratios are higher than on most academic programs. In part, the reason for this is a product of the method. WBIS students typically require far greater input at the beginning of the program than they do at the end. As they learn to become autonomous learners, the need for active tutor input declines. Adult learners engaged in meaningful study are on the whole well motivated to do so. Efficiency in terms of the use of tutor time also is improved where delivery and assessment is carried out by a co-delivery partner.

Quality Assurance

As with any other academic program, quality assurance (QA) is fundamental for the delivery of WBIS. In this sense, QA is not simply something imposed externally or from within the institution. WBIS is the creation of academic tutor practitioners prepared to place the learning needs of students over the traditional academic allegiance to instruction in subject discipline. It is not the product of an institutional drive to generate additional income, although as is discussed in the next section, “WBIS as a Business,” the learning and business aspects of WBIS go hand in hand. As a result, the commitment to the maintenance of academic quality is integral to the culture and practice of those delivering it. The role of external and internal QA agencies has, therefore, less to do with the external imposition of an artificial concept of academic quality (as much of the academic literature implies), but to assure and verify its presence.

Such quality assurance is not always apparent to those, especially in the rest of the university, for whom anything as nonstandard as WBIS represents the risk of reputational damage. As Gibbs (2009) has noted in the context of WBL at the University of Middlesex, to provide direct empirical evidence on academic standards is

very difficult, and in every university where WBL has developed, there has been a large degree of institutional resistance based upon a fear of low academic standards.

At Chester, the radical nature of WBIS has created a distinctive community of practice that is acutely aware of the anxieties of the rest of the university in this respect (Leonard & Talbot, 2009). The explicit focus on learning, rather than subject discipline and didactic instruction, is deeply embedded within the community. The latest developments in learning theory, academic standards, credit systems and level descriptors are the stuff of everyday conversation, as well as more formal meetings held once a month to discuss learning and teaching issues. The cultural commitment to quality is embedded in a formal QA system.

Within the U.K., there are standard external and internal quality assurance processes and procedures, which, although often bureaucratically burdensome, have the virtue of signaling to others that academic standards are not only maintained, but there are constant attempts to improve upon them. On a day-to-day basis, there are regular formally constituted and recorded program team meetings at which quality issues are discussed and resolved. Reporting directly to these meetings are those who have previously met with student representatives. The outcomes of both sets of meetings, along with other materials such as student evaluations of modules, are reported in an annual monitoring report prepared by the program leader, and independently evaluated by another academic member of the faculty, before discussion occurs at the faculty level and, where there are outstanding issues, at the university level. The standard of academic work is independently reviewed by an external examiner, an academic from another university. The external examiner attends assessment and academic award boards, where marks and final evaluations are formally decided, and prepares a formal written report on the work reviewed. Minor reviews to the program can be made, but every five years there is a formal re-validation, again involving external independent academic advisors.

In addition to internal quality assurance, all U.K. universities and their individual programs are regulated and overseen by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), an independent body charged with setting standards and ensuring delivery of those standards. The QAA set standards in broad terms by publishing subject benchmarks, defining the nature of the different degree programs. They also are responsible for inspecting and assuring academic institutions. The last inspection at Chester was in 2010, where special attention was paid to WBIS as an example of nonstandard provision. The review included interviews with staff and students, a review of policies, practices and procedures, and sampling of student assignments. The final review identified WBIS as an example of good practice (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2010, pp. 11, 20).

As well as regulatory regimes, there are a number of professional networks with which WBIS tutors engage. The Higher Education Academy (HEA) seeks to improve and maintain pedagogical practices of academics in higher education. All WBIS tutors are certified fellows of the HEA and there is active involvement in the HEA employer engagement network as the basis for continuing professional development. There also is participation in other bodies such as the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL) and the University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC).

WBIS as a Business

For many academics, the idea of education as a business is an anathema. For WBIS tutors, getting and keeping business clients is simply part of the job; it is not viewed as threatening standards, academic integrity or the learning of students. Clients are made aware that the university maintains rigorous academic standards from the outset, and that the clients are not “purchasing” qualifications. The attention to individual learning needs and the focus on progressive learning does not preclude failure for some. It is a fact of life that without clients, there are no students.

This entrepreneurial attitude has been part of the WBIS culture from the outset. WBIS is partly the product of

developments in theories of knowledge and learning, but these coincided with greater political encouragement to facilitate formal learning in the workplace during the later 1990s (Callender, 1997; Department for Education and Employment, 1998; Eraut, Alderton, Cole, & Senker, 1998; Sutherland, 1998). At the same time, U.K. universities were encouraged by government to develop a “third mission,” with the advent of the Higher Education Reach-out to Business and the Community Fund (HEROBC), to become more entrepreneurial (Burton, 1998). In addition to generating income from teaching full-time undergraduates and research funding, universities were expected to generate revenue from other commercial activities. WBIS, although an income-generating activity for the university, was, as previously noted, a program conceived and developed by tutors with a commitment to learning and wider engagement with learning from formerly excluded groups. Its invention, coincident with the “third mission” agenda, ensured greater institutional support than might be expected for a radical learning framework.

The emphasis on business has therefore been embedded in the culture and practice of WBIS tutors from the outset. To some extent, this is by virtue of necessity. Since WBIS is not well understood in the wider university, there has been little institutional investment in its development, including marketing and promotion. Along with the monthly meetings to discuss learning and teaching issues, there is another meeting to discuss business issues. Tutors and administrators devise publicity material and follow up interest from potential clients. Occasionally, tenders are bid for but much business comes from “word-of-mouth,” as WBIS students tell their friends and colleagues about the program. Given the lack of resources tutors have sought low cost, time-efficient methods to ensure there is time for actual delivery. In recent years, this has led to pioneering use (for academics) of social media. For example we were approached via LinkedIn by a film production company who wanted accreditation for their in-house training.

The drive for more efficient and profitable ways of working has led to other changes in practice. In the earlier period of WBIS, almost all delivery was by WBIS tutors to individuals and employer cohorts. In recent years, direct delivery has been increasingly undertaken by third parties in what are called “co-delivery” arrangements. This describes the practice of delivery and assessment, using the WBIS framework being conducted by training companies or those delivering training and developing within companies and colleges. In this kind of relationship, the role of the WBIS tutor is facilitation and quality assurance. The mechanisms in place to achieve this, especially in respect of quality assurance, are beyond the scope of this paper, but are described by Talbot, Perrin and Meakin (2014).

Integrating WBIS with the University

WBIS produces a myriad of pathways for learners and cohorts. Some of these learning pathways are relatively prescribed such as the foundation in government developed for the British civil service or the GROW (Graduate Research Opportunities Worldwide) program developed for a group of Danish hoteliers, the first time a WBIS pathway was delivered in another language. Some pathways have been created for occupational groups such as regeneration professionals and housing managers. Most of the delivery has been from the Centre for Work Related Studies (CWRS) where WBIS is housed, but the framework belongs to the university as a whole, not one faculty. Increasingly, other members of the university have seen the opportunity WBIS represents and there are now many WBIS pathways delivered across the university, similar to the way Rogers (2003) suggested that the diffusion model illustrates the spread of innovations.

As might be expected, alongside the university’s “friends of WBIS,” there have been internal critics, usually based upon a perception of risk and lower standards. Universities are in many ways highly conservative institutions, and it is interesting to note that many previous attempts to create innovative learning models have failed to integrate with the existing academic infrastructure (Conole, 2004). In the past in the U.K., resistance to vocational education in universities led to the creation of polytechnics (now retitled as “universities” [Robinson, 2007]), while the failure to provide effective distance learning led to the creation of the Open University (Perry, 1976; Caley, 2001). Despite its growth, WBL has encountered serious institutional

resistance in many established universities amid fears that it represents a threat to academic standards (Garnett, 2007).

Experience at Chester suggests that in addition to academic objections, accommodating a nonstandard program from an administrative perspective is equally problematic. The rolling admissions and negotiable aspects of the program have been a challenge for administrators used to enrolling 18 year olds once a year in named subjects with a specific set of familiar sounding modules. As can be imagined, the administration of WBIS is considerably more complex and, as a result, has necessitated having operational staff who work closely with and are themselves WBIS specialists, creating a kind of university within a university. While the emphasis in this paper is necessarily focused on academic matters, implementing WBIS involves considerable operational challenges.

Concluding comments

At the risk of inviting contradiction, WBIS tutors believe it to be one of the most radical, innovative and dynamic programs of higher education anywhere. It differs significantly from many other WBL programs, which, although delivered to employees in a paying organization, are largely cohort-based and involve didactic instruction in subject disciplines, (Nottingham, 2012). In terms of choice and flexibility, it bears comparison with some U.S. private providers, but again, there are significant differences in terms of pedagogy, application and quality.

In mainland Europe, universities have been slower to adopt programs that recognize experiential learning. Since 2013, all European universities are required to adopt policies and procedures to recognize what in the U.K. would be called “experiential learning,” but which is officially called nonformal and informal learning (Council of the European Union, 2012). The possibility of transferring practices developed at Chester is under active discussion with partner European universities, but it is recognized by all parties that this is a complex task. WBIS has been developed by a group of individuals located within a specific cultural and institutional context. The relative autonomy of U.K. universities, the emphasis on entrepreneurialism and robust quality assurance mechanisms have enabled a nonstandard program like WBIS to flourish despite numerous barriers. As a result, it is hard to know how much of the practice is transferrable. The challenges for tutors look particularly acute as the role is very different from that of the traditional academic tutor, but there also are considerable operational and cultural barriers to overcome. From the perspective of a WBIS tutor, the rest of the university, with its standard intake of students, standard pedagogic practices, policies and procedures, looks like a car factory. Universities, to use Burns and Stalker’s (1961) celebrated distinction, are essentially mechanistic organizations. They are adapted to stable operating conditions but are poorly equipped to deal with the rapidly changing learning requirements of a post-industrial, knowledge economy. WBIS is a program adapted specifically for the contemporary labor market, and those who work in higher education and appreciate the need to adapt may underestimate the difficulty of changing the faculty.

The Frenchman Raymond Loewy (1951) cautioned that the most rational solutions to our problems are not necessarily the most appropriate. What is equally important is our readiness to accept those solutions. Although intended to be applied to the principles of industrial design, his concept of “MAYA” – Most Advanced Yet Acceptable – with the emphasis on “acceptable,” is a useful starting point in considering how WBIS might be transferred.

Notes

¹ The Learning from Experience Trust (<http://www.learningexperience.org.uk/index.php>) was established in 1986 by Norman Evans following time spent working at the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning in the 1970s (<http://www.cael.org/>). For a review of practices in respect to the assessment of experiential learning in England, see Pokorny (2011).

² What is known as APL in the U.K. is referred to variously in other countries as prior learning

assessment (U.S. and Canada), recognition of prior learning (Australia, South Africa, France) or validation of nonformal and informal learning (Germany, Spain). A 2012 European Council resolution recommended that European Union member states adopt the latter term, as well as implement strategies to capture such learning. It also is the term preferred by UNESCO (2012) and the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) (Werquin, 2010).

³ The U.K. National Qualifications Framework ascribes a level of learning for all qualifications from level 1 to level 8. Level 4 is the standard achieved for the first year of a bachelor's degree, 5 the second year, 6 the final year. Level 7 is master's level. Level 8 is the doctoral level.

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Glossary of Acronyms Used on the Work Based and Integrative Studies (WBIS) Program

APL (Accreditation of Prior Learning): use of accumulated academic credit for incorporation into a newly negotiated award. The maximum allowable APL on a named Chester award is two-thirds of the total credit.

APCL (Accreditation of Prior Certificated Learning): a type of APL awarded on the basis that the student possesses credit from a prior award that is cognate with the planned WBIS program of study and award title. The

prior award must be from an institution or organization of standing and the credit must be current – awarded within the past five years.

APEL (Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning): a type of APL awarded on the basis of the demonstration of significant and appropriate learning from experience. The learning should be based upon significant and demonstrable professional practice given currency by means of reflective analysis, informed by relevant academic literature.

ASLA (Approved Studies Learning Agreement): learning contract and registration document combined, completed by students at the beginning of their studies on WBIS. The ASLA indicates their intended award title and planned program of studies along with completion dates. ASLAs are negotiated between individual students and their personal academic tutor (PAT) and then scrutinized by all WBIS tutors before being passed for registration purposes.

CWRS (Centre for Work Related Studies): centre within the faculty of business enterprise and lifelong learning for WBIS tutors.

NELA (Negotiated Experiential Learning Agreement): agreement between PAT and student as to the content and nature of a negotiated experiential learning module (NELM). A template is adapted indicating learning outcomes, focus, timescale, resources and so on.

NELMs (Negotiated Experiential Learning Modules): modules negotiated between PAT and student that allows for new experiential learning. NELMs are typically used to devise transdisciplinary workplace projects and can be either single (10 ECTS credits), double (20 ECTS) or triple (30 ECTS).

PAT (Personal Academic Tutor): WBIS tutor assigned to a student usually on the basis of personal expertise. For example, tutors with a health background are therefore likely to be a PAT for students working in the health sector. In addition to being responsible for welfare, progression, academic development and so on, the PAT also facilitates the Self-Review module, APL claims and NELMs.

WAP (WBIS Approval Panel): University panel that meets regularly to assess the academic validity of proposed WBIS modules and specialist pathways within the WBIS framework.

Other Specialist Terms Used

Co-delivery: a process for accrediting learning in the workplace that involves co-facilitation and co-assessment with tutors otherwise employed in outside organizations, but who are mentored and trained to work with CWRS for these specific purposes.

External Examiners: formal practice in U.K. universities for independently verifying quality assurance on all university programs of learning by means of the appointment of an independent academic as scrutineer and critical friend.

Higher Education Academy: U.K. body dedicated to improving the quality of teaching and learning in universities. WBIS tutors are all fellows of the HEA and participate in the specialist employer engagement network.

Learning from Experience Trust: charitable foundation dedicated to facilitating the development and use of experiential learning. The trust was instrumental to establishing the changes in pedagogic practice that led to the creation of WBIS.

Quality Assurance Agency: U.K. national body responsible for assuring the quality of higher education in the U.K. The QAA promotes good practice as well as carries out institutional inspections.

Shell Framework: term used to describe a validated WBL program that enables learners to negotiate awards within a framework, without the need for further revalidation.

Work-Based Learning: term usually used to denote formally accredited experiential learning in the workplace with the emphasis on *doing* as an outcome.

Work-Related Learning: term used to describe learning relevant to workplace practice that may not be experiential or focused on application.