Student Engagement In The Context Of Work Based Learning As An Unconventional Form Of Higher Education

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Abstract: This particular paper is derived from a research project funded by Higher Education Academy (HEA) in the UK as an exploratory study. The research is concerned with the concept of student engagement in the context of Work-Based Learning (WBL) at Middlesex University. This paper draws attention to the distinction between WBL and more conventional university-based courses in relation to considering student engagement with the university. Our research showed that the literature on student engagement assumes in the most part that students are full-time undergraduates or graduates studying university-based programmes. Nevertheless, the fairly new field of WBL provides a focus of study outside the university in a work context which overrules these assumptions. This study aims to provide an understanding of the WBL students experience, identify any gaps that exist between current provision and expectations, and achieve indicators of good practice at institutional level to strengthen work based learners' engagement.

Introduction

WBL is designed around the idea of learning that provides a flexible learning experience which is delivered through work, in work, for work. At the Institute for WBL the candidates are offered a university level learning in their workplace. Through accreditation of candidates' work experience via self-reflective report the Institute guides the candidates through BA, MA or DProf degrees. The outcome of the process of studying at a WBL programme could be summarized as constructing worker researchers/learners.

All students enrolled in WBL programmes are experienced workers and they carry out their studies on a part-time basis which is based in their work environment. Due to this unique student profile, student engagement in WBL programmes requires a through understanding of the concept of engagement within a part-time and distance learning setting. For this purpose, the research focused on the perception of engagement by the Work based learners at Middlesex University. In order to grasp an understanding of the needs and perceptions of these learners we conducted in-depth interviews with eight recent graduates. The research adopts a holistic approach to include the two main components of student engagement: the learner's context and motivations, and the approach and strategies of the HEI. This study aims to provide an understanding of the WBL students experience, identify any gaps that exist between current provision and expectations, and achieve indicators of good practice at institutional level to strengthen work based learners' engagement.

The WBL students differ from more traditional forms of higher education and WBL students' experience a more individualised and self-motivating form of engagement. Therefore they pose a challenge to the traditional teaching and learning methods within universities and urge a reconsideration of involvement ranging from administrative staff to the ICT used in teaching and learning. An important element of work based learning is that the focus of study is outside the university in a work context. The conclusions from this study are therefore to some extent generalisable to other work based courses.

It is important to draw a distinction between work based learning and university based courses when considering student engagement with the university. The literature on student engagement assumes on the most part that students are full time undergraduates studying university-based programmes. This is discussed in relation to gaining a clear definition of student engagement and getting to the essence of what is involved in a good quality of experience for students. There follows some literature which addresses part time students' experiences and this adds relevance to the part time WBL students that form this study. Finally the limited literature on WBL students' experience with their HEA is briefly reviewed.

23

Literature on Student Engagement

It is widely understood that the level and quality of student engagement with their higher education institutions is critical in determining student retention, learning, achievement and graduation (Laird et al, 2008; Bryson and Hand, 2008). Student engagement has also been cited as an important mediating factor in the development of students' sense of belonging to their educational institutions (Coates, 2006).

In order to guide the present study, the operational definition of student engagement provided by Harper and Quaye (2008) is adopted. They state:

Student engagement is simply characterised as participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes (p1).

Despite the growing academic interest in student engagement in higher education, theorisations of this concept are still emergent and under contestation. Broadly, conceptualisations of student engagement encompass two dimensions that appear to be in close interaction with each other yet represent separate conceptual planes on which student engagement is manifested. Student engagement consists of, on the one hand, the student's active involvement in learning, i.e. the learners' motivations, inclinations and efforts to engage with their learning. Student engagement also consists of institutional engagement, i.e. the institutional support structures and organisational approaches that promote inclusive and open interactions with and between students (Harper and Quaye, 2008; Kuh, et al 2007). Researchers and academics appear to vary regarding which of the two dimensions they emphasise in their conceptualisations of student engagement. Some focus on the learners (Riggs and Gholar, 2009) and some on the institution (Little et al, 2009). In this study, a holistic approach is adopted that acknowledges the mutual interaction between these two actors in constructing student engagement.

The facilitating and inhibiting factors identified in the literature have largely been researched and understood in relation to student engagement within mainstream higher education in the form of taught, campus-based courses. However, higher education is increasingly extending to include part-time modes of study and distance/online courses to accommodate a changing student demography that is more mobile, digitally connected, professionally established and diverse in terms of age, culture and economic background. It is likely that student engagement within these different educational contexts will show commonality with 'traditional' student engagement, but also exhibit unique features and forms as well as different strengths and challenges.

Though research on student engagement is emerging within newer modes of education, it still remains incommensurate with the growing numbers of students drawn towards such study, and the policy focus on lifelong learning which turns a spotlight on these areas of higher education. The emergence of WBL programmes as a form of flexible distance learning is one such area where research on student engagement processes is required and where a limited amount of research has taken place.

Little et al (2009) found that "institutions view student engagement as central to enhancing the student experience, but more emphasis seems to be placed on viewing students as consumers and rather less on viewing students as partners in a learning community" and this is where work based learning students may to some extent benefit in their engagement. WBL students are invited to be partners in a learning agreement (or contract) with the university and their place of work (Garnett, 2000). The three-way partnership links work based learning students into an engagement with both an HEI and a work community adding a different dimension to notions of engagement. Successful work based learners will have developed themselves successfully through university learning and have also made a significant impact on their work situation (Nixon, 2008). Brennan (2005) found that integrating work-based learning into higher education requires a whole range of supporting structures and changes of attitude towards learning. New approaches to learning require new thinking from all the stakeholders involved in university work based learning. Young and Stephenson (2007) focus on how an interactive learning environment can support work based learning whilst Boud and Costley (2007) show how the work based learning student's experience is based on engagement with the university that requires a pedagogical approach that supports the three-way connection.

Methodology and data analysis

A literature search was conducted to gain an overview of conceptualisations, debates and approaches towards student engagement. This was then used to inform the construction of a semi-structured interview schedule and a student survey in order to examine students' engagement with the IWBL.

In line with literature which supports the conceptualisation of student engagement as a dual interaction between students' expectations and institutional strategies, informal and formal conversations and interviews were held with members of staff at the IWBL in order to explore its institutional approach. This methodology coheres with the holistic approach to student engagement that is adopted by this study.

The semi structured interviews were conducted with a selection of undergraduate and postgraduate students who graduated in 2009. Interviews were conducted by two independent researchers who had had no contact with the research participants prior to the commencement of this study.

The two researchers who collected the data initially worked independently of each other to code the interview material and then compared their codes while making necessary adjustments through a process of dialogue and discussion. Analysis was related to literature in order to contextualise the findings and develop recommendations.

The framework for WBL student engagement

WBL programmes are based in students' actual work as well as having a distance relationship with the university and this is reflected in the kinds of support, resources and interactions that students receive and garner for their learning. The most important source of guidance is certainly the HEI, but the workplace, with its concrete and immediate bearing on students' lives, is also a contributor.

Institutional support, interaction and resources

Students' contact and interaction with the IWBL and the HEI in general took tangible form predominately through their relationship with their assigned WBL adviser (commonly referred to as an 'academic adviser'). In many cases this was the sole personal relationship that students had with the HEI. The fact that communications between students and advisers were based almost entirely on email contact, supported sometimes by telephone conversations, is an important indicator of the university-related aspect of the WBL study experience. Email and telephone communication was used to ask questions, discuss ideas and get clarifications with email having the added use of enabling students to submit work and receive written feedback.

Other institute resources were also used to facilitate student learning. These included guidebooks and other reading material, often posted to students, containing the programmes' structure and module content and guidelines for planning and writing course work. Students rarely used the on-campus library because of its distance from their workplace and residence and because of lack of time. However, while distance library resources, including online journals and books were also available, these were not widely used due to technical difficulties with the university's ATHENS account that enables remote access to resources. The WBL student evaluation survey conducted in 2009 found that only 20% of respondents used the online library resources with many describing attempts to use online facilities as "frustrating". Although the HEI has pursued the development of virtual learning environments (VLE), their structures and procedures are complex and difficult to understand. There are multiple types of software with separate purposes and functioning which require training to gain optimum benefit. Given the complexity of these online software products, one-off training courses do not fully prepare students for their use, especially amongst those students who have had limited prior experience of using information technology in general. More sustained training sessions, however, are difficult to provide to learners that are based at a distance. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the virtual learning environments are not used efficiently by work based learners.

On a few occasions students visited the campus for face-to-face meetings with their advisers, to attend the induction sessions and research methods modules and to present their final research projects.

Though administrative staff were another source of support that students could draw upon to deal with practical matters, they were not often approached. This may indicate the lack of administrative difficulties faced by students. Indeed some students reported not requiring administrative assistance. However, it may also be suggestive of a lack of identifiable and direct channels and of visibility of the administrative staff of IWBL. Many students did not know the names of people working on the IWBL administrative team. Therefore, when practical enquiries arose, students often directed these to their advisers or asked them to suggest other people who could help them. Others located administrative help by making a general enquiry through the university switchboard.

Clearly, administrative problems related to funding can have a detrimental effect on the student's study experience. The problems faced by this student indicate the importance of good coordination and communication between the HEI staff and sponsoring employers. When these are government employers, with whom traditional delays in funding have been observed, there is an added need for tolerance and flexibility on the part of the HEI.

Of the many different ways in which students could access, use, and engage with the HEI, it is apparent that communications with the adviser were the most frequent, in-depth and fruitful conduit through which this occurred:

In the eventuality that their assigned adviser was unavailable for guidance, or when contact was insufficient, students were generally unaware of, and did not seek, other sources of personal and direct support from within the HEI. Within the context of work based learning studies, therefore, the adviser is fundamental to mediating student experiences and engagement with the HEI. Whereas students of campus-based taught courses have direct access to a vast array of HEI facilities and services, and are in contact with a wide range of teaching faculty with whom fruitful interactions can be established, work based learners' experiences and interactions with the HEI are determined largely by their relationship with an individual adviser. This places a heavy onus on advisers in enabling student engagement with their learning. Such individualised forms of student interaction with their HEI also lead to vastly different experiences and perceptions of the HEI from learner to learner.

Interaction with other learners

In contrast to the various ways in which work based learners engaged with the HEI, their interaction with other learners was minimal. Lack of peer interaction was due to:

- the distance learning nature of the course
- part-time status of students
- individualised course content

Since students were studying at a distance there were very few opportunities to meet other people. On rare occasions, students met each other when they visited the campus to attend short courses. However, these meetings were not prolonged or regular enough to facilitate the formation of friendships. With their busy schedules, work based learners also did not feel they had time to maintain contacts, as is suggested by a student here as she talks about her lack of contact with other learners:

No I didn't. I think that is because of the nature of my work, which is just to go to school the whole day, teach and come back. It's a bit isolating, so it's difficult to find time to even phone someone. (W3)

Another very important factor that explains lack of peer interaction was the individualised content of each learners WBL programme. Unlike students of taught courses, work based learners did not share a common academic or professional area within which ideas and thoughts could be exchanged and discussed. This lack of common ground may have reduced the relevance of peer interaction for these students. This point is illustrated again by the following student:

...with WBL everyone is doing something different to do with their own jobs. So having contact with others would not have been quite as relevant. (W3)

While some students did find the absence of peer interaction 'isolating', most students did not particularly miss the lack of social and intellectual stimulation from other learners even though they acknowledged its possible benefits in providing emotional support. This lack of need for social interaction was often attributed to their focus on their studies:

The focus on completing their individual projects and lack of time to engage socially explains why students did not seek and maintain interactions via email or through online forums. In contrast to 'traditional' students, peer interaction does not appear to be a central concern of work based learners and plays a very marginal role in their engagement as students.

Support from the workplace

Apart from the HEI, learners' workplaces were another source of practical, emotional, and intellectual support. Practical support came in the form of full or partial funding of the WBL programme, or more indirectly

in that the workplace provided a resource base that could be used by employees. Thus some people used the library at their workplace rather than the HEI because it was more accessible. Since students' research projects were conducted at their workplace, colleagues sometimes provided logistical help, such as facilitating access to research participants, helping to conduct surveys and organising research related meetings and workshops. A few employers also gave study leave.

The workplace was also a source of emotional support through the encouragement shown by employers and other colleagues:

> *The head of music [department] was supportive. He would ask how I was getting on and offer encouragement, which was really good. (M2)*

It also reduced feelings of isolation by filling the void in social relations arising from the distance learning nature of the WBL programme, as one learner states:

> *I think it is the nature of the course. You are kind of 'flying solo' it feels like that. I had a work colleague who completed her masters two years ago and she was quite good, so I did have support. And I had my line manager... So I think people who go on to this course need to be fairly grounded and have contacts already in the workplace or wherever for support. (W2)*

Employers and colleagues also provided intellectual support by giving advice and feedback, and discussing ideas. These people were particularly well placed to give such support because they were aware of the context of the study, perhaps more so than the WBL adviser. Their inputs were highly appreciated.

> *The support from my workplace was quite important because in my research, I did the observation in my institute and I discussed the results of observing with the focus group of colleagues. With this focus group I could discuss the evolution of my project because they know the organisation, they know the way it works, the limitations and then the opportunities and it was interesting to discuss this with them and that really helped. (M3)*

The workplace is an important source of support to work based learners in their academic pursuit. While scholarship on student engagement focuses on the role of academic institutions in facilitating student learning, in the context of WBL studies, the important role of the workplace also needs to be acknowledged.

Processes in student engagement with WBL

Whilst the engagement of work based learners is supported by a framework of resources, contacts and interactions, student engagement itself is constituted of deeper, dynamic processes. These processes relate to the students' engagement with the university's expectations and academic requirements, students' involvement and ownership of their learning and the imperative to engage and make a difference through project work with their organisation or professional field. The ways in which these interconnected processes are played out in WBL studies, creates a unique picture of student engagement and identification in this educational space.

<u>Academic integration</u>
The first step in WBL students' engagement with their learning and their HEI was the process of encountering, trying to understand and meet academic standards, as well as grappling with self-directed learning. This equates to a process of academic integration, involving socialisation within the HEI culture and norms, which, in terms of student retention, is a central determinant of whether students continue with their studies.

As discussed earlier, many work based learners have had no prior experience of university education. Initially, therefore, students had anxieties about what was expected of them and whether they would be able to meet the academic standards of a WBL degree. Support and feedback from the adviser and guidance from course hand books were critical in helping students develop a workable understanding of academic standards and expectations:

> *I was able to send him (adviser) drafts of what I was doing just to ensure I was pitching on the right level and I had the appropriate content. (W2)*

Apart from academic standards, students also had to get used to engaging in self-directed learning and develop ways of managing it, though initially some students found this quite challenging:

Online assignments are very difficult because you don't have a one-to one, you don't have the opportunity of speaking to the lecturer every week and the lecturer telling you "listen; this is what you're doing wrong, this is where you need to improve. (W1)

Learners acknowledged that they required a high level of self-sufficiency and maturity to be self-directed in their learning, indicating that such form of study might not be suited to younger students who form the bulk of the university population:

...when you don't know what you are expected to do, you have to have a strong character. In fact I was going to give up. The first six weeks I was going to give up. And because I had a supportive family who egged me on and called me a "loser" that really shocked me. I said no, I can't, I mean that's my character. I am quite a "go getter". You have to be determined to succeed, because an online degree is not easy. (W1)

Students often used HEI resources such as the course handbook to structure and organise their learning. As students developed a firmer understanding of academic requirements, they also gained greater confidence in being able to progress and accomplish a degree. Their reliance on the support and guidance from the tutor reduced and students increasingly took the front seat in managing their studies. Internalising the universities standards, expectations and norms of academic discourse were essential in enabling them to engage more fully with their learning and to galvanise their own self-motivation towards completing the degree.

This is not to suggest that the adviser's support became irrelevant, indeed it continued to be valued in that students felt 'supported' when they had this guidance and 'less supported' when they did not. However, if, for some students, the initial phase of establishing contact with the adviser, and through this, socialisation within the academic culture, does not go smoothly or remains weak, doubts regarding their desire to continue the program become stronger and may lead to a less positive perception of the study experience.

This occurred in the case of one individual whose contact with his adviser was unsatisfactory:

I was frustrated because I didn't think I was getting the advice that I needed. I was struggling to get in touch with my advisor a lot of the time. (M2)

These feelings of alienation led this student to consider withdrawing from the programme but encouragement from a close friend who "convinced me to keep going" prevented the student from doing so.

The role of the WBL adviser and HEI is one of introducing and familiarising work based learners with the academic culture, rather than providing directed mentoring in the traditional sense. Therefore, the HEI, in the context of WBL studies, is a background facilitator of learning by providing a more structured support that is conducive to self-directed reflection and academic development.

Taking ownership of learning

Another indicator of student engagement in work based learning studies is the process of students taking ownership and responsibility for their learning. This process is particularly encouraged by the learner-negotiated course content of the WBL degrees.

As was demonstrated earlier, many students were driven to do a WBL degree because it gave them the ability to exercise greater choice and control over the content of their learning and was significant for their work. Learners could draw and build on their prior work experience while also channelling the learning gained during the degree back into the workplace in ways that were immediately relevant to their professional life. The high degree of choice and control in constructing their learning objectives and the immediate relevance of the course to their work role enabled students to experience an important sense of ownership of their learning which they did not feel they could experience within traditional taught courses.

I was looking around for all sorts of things to do and I particularly wanted to do something of my own choice because with the cert. ed. you are forced into studying certain aspects which sometimes you might not be interested in, you'll do it, but you are not interested in. But I wanted to do something that was very relevant to my particular work so this suited me perfectly, this one.(W4)

The flexible structure of WBL degrees meant that students could organise their study time according to their own schedules. For some students this further facilitated a sense of ownership over their learning:

28

I didn't have to be coming down to Middlesex for regular tutorials, it all seemed to be in my hands you know, and with full time work, time was quite limited for studying so I had to put certain chunks of time aside to study...And as long as I met my dead line it was up to me when I did that work and I just felt incredibly comfortable with the way it worked out, and I didn't ever feel pressurised by it... (W2)

Active engagement of students with their learning could also be seen in the manner in which they created time to study, in spite of hectic work schedules, by sacrificing personal, family, and social time. Here some students describe these sacrifices.

Identification with the HEI

The distance learning nature of WBL degrees has a strong bearing on the extent to which learners feel a sense of identification with their HEI. As earlier mentioned, work based learners have little physical contact with the HEI as a whole with interactions mostly limited to their individual WBL advisers. The physical remoteness of the HEI also limits students' involvement in the social aspects of student life such as making friends and participating in social events. For most students this lack of physical and social presence of the campus in their lives contributed to a lack of sense of belonging to the HEI.

...I didn't really feel I was at university. I didn't really think I was part of the social fabric of the whole thing because it was distance learning. So I wasn't that involved socially. (M2)

However the lack of connection to the HEI was not simply a result of physical isolation. Students also perceived the university as a 'young' space, which they, as mature people, did not fully feel part of.

...I must say I saw the differences with mature students that we don't feel quite part of it as the full time students do. So, it's always a different experience. So I wouldn't say I would ever really at this stage access any of the student sites or really the general university and you know what's available on campus all that stuff goes on. (W2)

Therefore, for most WBL students, engagement in terms of experiencing a sense of belonging or community with their particular HEI is relatively weak. This can be attributed in large part to their physical and social isolation from the campus as well as their own perceptions of themselves as older students for whom 'university life' is not relevant.

On the other hand, students of work based learning studies expressed a more abstract identification of themselves as learners. This was visible in the importance they attached to getting a degree as recognition of the learning they had engaged in throughout their professional life and the academic skills they had gained through the course of their studies.

In fact it (the degree) helps you discover what your work is all about. It wasn't just learning it was experiencing it and putting it in paper. (W1)

Though students might not have a strong sense of attachment to their particular educational institution, it appears that association and identification with academia in general is important to work based learners and obtaining a degree is an important signifier of this.

The graduation ceremony was, therefore, an important event for students because it was here that they got a tangible experience of their isolated study as connected to a wider academic establishment and community of learners. The social affirmation and recognition that they got from this experience added to their sense of accomplishment.

I think it [graduation ceremony] kind of closes it and finishes it and makes it feel real... But you don't really feel you are part of a university in a way, because you are at home. And I suppose this made it real for me, to go there and have your name called out and be given the piece of paper and be part of it, it made me feel like I really had done it. (W3)

Students' identification of themselves as learners and researchers could also be seen in the way in which they expressed a sense of solidarity with other researchers. Thus when asked why participants had chosen to take part in the study, many replied that this was because they now understood what it means to do research and were aware of the difficulties that researchers encountered in getting interviewees.

Conclusion

In the context of work based learning studies, the personal characteristics of learners are an important determinant of student engagement, more so than within traditional, campus-based education. To meet the challenge of distance learning, students need to have high levels of self-motivation, determination and self-sufficiency. The learner-centred pedagogy of work based learning and learning content which has a high degree of relevance to students' professional and career objectives, encourages students to take ownership and responsibility for their learning and so also contributes to student engagement. Support from the HEI in the form of adviser guidance and interaction, learning resources and administrative help is another critical factor in student engagement. Through this support, learners proceed to understand HEI standards and norms and achieve academic integration which is vital to student retention and achievement. The workplace, with its concrete and physical presence in learners' lives also facilitates their engagement by providing various forms of practical, emotional, and intellectual support that cannot be provided by the distant university. Social networks of friends, family and work colleagues play a similar supportive role.

The study suggests that taking ownership of learning is a vital aspect of student engagement. Within WBL degrees this process of ownership is facilitated in large part by the relevance of the course to learners' work context and professional development. This provides an important factor for enhancing student engagement in taught courses. If students are to be engaged with their learning, courses need to be made relevant to them.

To increase the relevance of university education to students, course content and advising, needs to be framed in ways which encourage students to draw connections between abstract discipline knowledge and the real-world context they live in. Beyond this, lecturers should pay greater attention to enabling students to draw out the ways in which course material is personally, socially and politically significant to themselves and their fields of work. Overall, student engagement in the field of WBL differs from more traditional forms of HE. WBL students experience a more individualised and self-motivating form of engagement which is mostly an outcome of their level of professional experience, maturity and expectations from a degree programme.

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31