

## Chapter 11

# Work-Based Learning in the United Kingdom: What We Know of Practice and an Example – The WBL Module and WBIS Program at the University of Chester

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The term work-based learning has been widely used in higher education in the UK since the 1990s, and there is evidence of a spread in practice. However, it is not recognized as a subject by the UK Higher Education Statistics Authority so that the extent of practice is unknown. A small unpublished survey sheds some light on the varieties and extent of practice in England and Wales, identifying five different approaches. Different pedagogical practices can exist within single universities, and most of the chapter outlines how the University of Chester incorporates two practices. Its work-based learning (WBL) module is available for all full-time second-year undergraduates regardless of discipline. Its purpose is to enable all students of the university the opportunity to gain real-world workplace experience and sensitize them to the requirements of experiential and lifelong learning. By contrast the work-based and integrative studies (WBIS) is an example of a fully negotiated whole program designed to facilitate the development of practice for those already working.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

'Work based learning' has wide currency as a term in UK education, both in universities and sub-degree vocational colleges. This chapter concentrates upon its use and application in universities and in particular a case study of the WBIS program at the University of Chester. Although the term itself is widely used to describe courses and modules it is not a 'subject' as recognised by the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA) so there is standard definition as to what the term means and no data on how many students are engaged in it. Casual observation confirms it is predominantly located in teaching intensive universities with rather less in those whose institutional mission is directed towards research. It also appears to be located in particular vocational disciplines such as health and engineering. A number of universities, including Chester have non-disciplinary Work based learning centers or units. Estimating the number of students who are engaged in something which might be called Work based learning is fraught but it would appear the numbers are rising.

The origins of practice can be traced back to the late 1960s and early 1970s when there were the first attempts to introduce whole program learning by contracts. The earliest example of such a program in the UK is the Independent Study program developed in the former North East London Polytechnic from 1974 (O'Reilly 1989). The program was conceived as being as being cross curricular and cross faculty. Students negotiated their award rather than choosing from a pre-set list of modules. The program also pioneered the use of short awards and ran successfully for a number of years especially with mature, adult learners so that by the end of the 1980s it accounted for 10% of the entire student body. The learning contract entered into by students began with a consideration of past learning as the basis for making a claim for academic credit, a review of current learning, a consideration as to what the student wished to learn, followed by how they would achieve this, what was needed in terms of resources and how the student would demonstrate they had achieved their aims. The proposed contract was then scrutinised by a team of tutors and a personal academic tutor allocated (O'Reilly 1989, p. 48). The other element established in the programme was to make 'critical reflection an explicit element of the learning process' (p. 50). Although attracting the program was criticised in an external government report in 1990 and administrative problems led to its closure. Many of the practices pioneered at North London Polytechnic were incorporated into the Work Based Learning framework by Middlesex University in 1995, which remains a leading provider and a template for other institutions (Portwood & Garnett, 2000; Lester & Costley, 2010).

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