Learning agreements: their function in work-based programmes at Middlesex University

Kathy Doncaster

Introduction
The National Centre for Work Based Learning Partnerships (NCWBLP) has been running work based learning programmes since 1995. In that time, more than 500 students have achieved awards in work-based learning studies, which range from Higher Education Certificate to Masters degree. The relevance of students’ programmes to the needs of their workplace is of fundamental importance in such programmes. This is due to one of the distinctive features of the work-based learning studies curriculum at Middlesex University – that it is designed for adults already in work, who study part-time, rather than for full time students who are preparing to enter the employment market for the first time. It offers opportunities to those who either missed out on higher education at what has been the “traditional” age, and/or who seek continuing professional development through an academic programme at under or postgraduate level which is closely integrated with their work needs.

All students must make their employer a partner to negotiations over the precise content of their programme of study through a learning agreement. Some students enrol as individuals and undertake this negotiation with their employer on an individual basis. However, the NCWBLP has also developed partnerships with employers in the public and private sectors, who sponsor their employees on work-based learning studies programmes. The value of such a partnership to an organisation is that it provides a training and development route for employees, and results in project work being undertaken by employee participants that is relevant to current organisational concerns. The focus of this paper is on how the learning agreement negotiated by each employee participant in a corporate group achieves this relevance.

The work-based learning studies framework
One of the reasons that work-based learning has emerged as a field of interest is due to the increasing importance of knowledge as a type of “capital” required by organisations to ensure their survival (Stewart, 1997). In
order to develop and retain such capital, employers have needed to make learning a much more important part of organisational culture. There has also been a blurring of boundaries between work and education, which has undermined the traditional notion that learning occurred chiefly before work. With the rapid generation of knowledge, workers are finding it necessary to continually update their learning in order to remain employable. Learning is now embedded within work, and work has always been an inevitable part of learning – it requires working at – especially in current economic and social conditions (Barnett, 1999).

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Stephenson has called the ability to put learning to use flexibly and effectively in unfamiliar situations “independent capability” (Stephenson, 1998). Learning how to learn rather than simply applying known solutions to problems is becoming an ever-more important ability. It is in the context of these developments that work-based learning has begun to play a part in university curricula. There is now increasing co-operation between industry and the universities (Scofield, 1999), with employer demands for graduates with better business awareness putting pressure on universities to place greater emphasis on preparing students for, and developing their learning in, the labour market. Work-based elements to programmes of study are being used as a means of achieving this (see Brennan and Little (1996) for a review). The emergence of work-based learning in such a complex context has led to a range of ways of defining it. This was made amply clear at the first international conference on researching work and learning, held at Leeds University (1999), where it was considered in contexts as diverse as continuing professional development, trade unions, the local community and key skills development at undergraduate level.

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The programme framework within which students engage in such work-based learning is a generic one. They undertake a core programme at under- or postgraduate level, which has the following four generic elements.

(1) Programme planning.
(2) Work-based project.
(3) Research methods.
(4) The recognition and accreditation of learning.

The precise content of an individual’s programme is negotiated in a learning agreement in a module on “programme planning”. All programmes, whether at under- or postgraduate level culminate in a “work-based project”. This is typically supported by a module on “research methods”, which introduces a range of research approaches and data collection techniques which are of particular relevance to work-based research and addresses issues of insider research in the workplace. In addition, and in acknowledgement of the learning students are likely to have already gained from their work, they also have the
opportunity to make claim for the accreditation of existing work-based and experiential learning (see Doncaster, forthcoming) and for the recognition of existing formal learning, in a module entitled “The recognition and accreditation of learning”. A claim is assessed for its comparability to the academic level of the programme being negotiated and may be included in the programme on that basis. The successful outcome of a programme of study is an award in work-based learning studies, with a particular focus on participants’ own area of expertise.

The role of the learning agreement

The role of the learning agreement is that of effecting the customisation of this generic framework to the objectives of individual students and their employers. Laycock and Stephenson (1993) point out that the use of learning agreements in higher education is part of the shift towards developing student autonomy and responsibility for learning, and enables students to develop a strong sense of ownership of their studies, clarify and argue a case for their learning goals, reflect on their learning experience and recognise the stakeholders in it. For students on work-based learning studies programmes at Middlesex University, the development of such skills in the self-management of learning is an outcome of the opportunity offered students to customise their programme of study.

A student’s learning agreement for a work-based learning studies programme at Middlesex University must be endorsed, by virtue of signature, by the student and the university, and also by the student’s employer. The learning agreement exemplifies not only students’ responsibility for their own learning, but for forwarding the interests of their organisation. It is a tripartite agreement, in which the needs of all three stakeholders must be seen to be met. It is because of the importance of the learning agreement that a core module in the work-based learning studies programme, “programme planning”, is devoted to its construction. Students must meet the university requirements for an approved programme of study in the learning agreement, in terms of level and amount of academic credit for the target award sought.

Thus, if they construct an honours degree, they must ensure that it contains at least 120 credits at level three out of a total of 360 credits to meet the university requirements for this award. Programmes may include accredited learning at acceptable academic levels, provided a case is made for its relevance to the programme content. However, the most important element in a programme of study is at least one work-based project. It is the topic of this which must be agreed with the student’s employer. Students must argue a case in their learning agreements for the value of their intended project, both to themselves and to their employer.

In order to develop a coherent programme proposal in their learning agreements, participants must justify the connections between the broad base of their accredited learning and the specificity of the work-based research which will form their project, and between their own career objectives in undertaking the programme and the strategic objectives of their organisation. It is in this negotiation between the three partners in the programme (the participant, the employer and the university) that the customisation of each student’s programme of study is effected.

The learning agreement and employer partnerships

The role of the learning agreement in employer partnerships developed by the NCWBLP is particularly interesting. In addition to students’ customisation of their individual programmes of study, as described above, there are possibilities for partner organisations to create customised programmes of work-based study for their employees, in liaison with the NCWBLP. This is made possible, first, because the generic nature of the work-based learning studies framework means that it can be used by a wide range of organisations. Those discussed in this paper are the London Borough of Enfield, Bovis UK and Harlow College of Further Education. Second, the generic framework can operate at both under- and postgraduate levels. This means that employee/participants with a wide range and depth of work expertise can undertake programmes at a level suitable for
them. Third, the accreditation facilities offered by Middlesex University are applicable not only to the accreditation of the learning of individual students as already described, but also to the accreditation of courses (Garnett 1998). In-house training courses in two of the employer partnerships discussed here have been accredited by Middlesex University and incorporated into the work-based learning studies programmes offered to employees at those organisations, either as compulsory or as optional modules. Employee participants, sponsored on a work-based learning studies programme which has been developed in liaison with their employer, develop their learning agreements within the parameters of the programme that has been customised for their organisation. The three case studies which follow show how learning agreements function within employer-partner work-based learning studies programmes.

**Development of the employer partnerships**

Each of the three partnership programmes discussed is delivered on site and co-ordinated by a NCWBLP link tutor and the training manager of the organisation concerned. This is necessarily a close relationship and has many advantages. The NCWBLP link tutor understands the quality assurance demands of Middlesex University, is responsible for assessment and provides tutorial support to employee participants. The training managers have an invaluable insider’s view of their organisation. Their knowledge of the management structure, the organisation’s strategic objectives, staff training regulations, and individual staff members means that they are able to ensure that individual learning agreements focus on the strategic needs of the organisation.

The London Borough of Enfield contains seven of Middlesex University’s campuses. The development of work-based learning studies programmes (Armsby et al., 1999) began in 1996 with the accreditation of the work-based learning of refugees resident in the borough, who often had university level learning achieved in their home countries. The programmes now meet the learning needs of a range of borough staff and residents. The programme cited in this paper is the MA Work-based Learning Studies, which is used to meet the training needs of middle managers, as it was realised that these needs were not being sufficiently covered through the certificate and diploma in management studies already offered. Staff from a range of departments, including Social Services, Education, Finance, Housing, Leisure and Corporate Services have undertaken the programme.

Bovis UK is part of the multinational Bovis group. It specialises in management contracting in the construction industry, and employs about 800 people in the UK. The development of this partnership shows some similarities to that developed with the London Borough of Enfield, in that the initial contact was the result of the company’s recognition that Middlesex University could accredit work-based learning. However, in this case, the partnership began not with the accreditation, by Middlesex University, of the learning of individual participants, but with the accreditation of Bovis’s own management development programme at postgraduate level. This was followed by discussions about the development of a postgraduate work-based learning studies programme for Bovis managers. The programme, begun in 1996, incorporated learning, accredited by the university, which managers achieved via inhouse training (see Doncaster and Garnett (forthcoming) for further discussion of the Bovis programme). Currently there are about 40 participants on the programme, almost all working towards a Masters degree.

Harlow College of Further Education is one of Middlesex University’s associate colleges. Since 1996, Middlesex University’s work-based learning programmes have been a major part of the staff training programme offered by the college (Doncaster and Garnett, forthcoming). The partnership began when the staff development manager at the college commissioned a pilot group, consisting of academic staff (teachers and heads of departments) and administrative staff, to undertake a work-based learning programme (the college had access to this programme by virtue of being an associate college). Since 1996, more than 40
participants have undertaken work-based learning programmes. The flexibility of the programmes means that staff can undertake either an undergraduate or a postgraduate programme, according to their need, and can complete it within a time scale that they themselves negotiate to accommodate their work commitments. This has been an important factor in the ongoing success of the programme in recruiting and retaining participants. In-house courses on such topics as “mentoring” and “leadership” have been accredited by Middlesex University, and employee participants have the option of including them in their work-based learning studies programmes.

**Partnership programme and employer involvement**

The learning agreement is central to all three partnership programmes. In the London Borough of Enfield Masters programme, there is a formal programme planning process which ensures the relevance of the participants’ programmes to the organisation’s strategic plans (Armsby et al., 1999). Employee participants must agree the appropriacy of their proposed programme, particularly the area of research to be undertaken in the project, with their line manager. This involves checking it against the objectives of their own personal development plan and the service development plan. This ensures that the proposed programme is relevant to local organisational needs. Practically, this is usually achieved by participants electing to undertake work-based projects in areas in which they are already involved. In addition, the head of corporate development and training must also agree the programme, as a check on its relevance to the organisation’s overall corporate development plan.

At Bovis UK, organisational endorsement of individual participants’ learning agreement is also required at the local as well as central level, through the signature of the local business centre head. Though the Masters programme was developed in liaison with the central Bovis Training Department, it was realised that the involvement of local business centre heads in agreeing to participants’ proposed programmes was also essential. This was to ensure that participants undertook projects which were relevant to their current work roles, and to ensure that line managers agreed to participants’ periodic absence from work to attend programme sessions.

Doncaster and Garnett (forthcoming) argue that an important incentive for line manager agreement is the potential of work-based projects to address issues of current local concern.

At Harlow College, the involvement of the three partners to the programme – the participating staff, Harlow College management and the university – is also crucial. As with the other two partnerships, the ongoing development of the programme has resulted in the realisation that benefit to the college is best achieved by participants involving their line managers in deciding what project work to undertake. The learning agreement now incorporates the signature of both the college principal and the local head of department or faculty.

**Relevant programme outcomes**

Participants are required to obtain employer signatures to their learning agreement, as described above. The learning agreements are then submitted for approval to Middlesex University, to ensure that they meet the requirements of academic level and amount of credit for the award sought. For the organisation, the most significant outcome of each programme is the work-based project. As Doncaster and Garnett (forthcoming) point out, work-based projects provide the organisation with an in-house research and development resource which adds to its intellectual capital and to enhancing performance at an operational level. Projects can do this in a range of ways.

Some projects focus on internal issues. For example, performance management procedures have been evaluated in a department in the London Borough of Enfield; means of increasing motivation within construction teams have been explored at Bovis UK and curriculum developments instituted in discrete subject areas at Harlow College. Some projects, usually at Masters level, may have a broader, or in some cases pan-organisation, scope. For example, a comparative study of several local authorities was undertaken in
the London Borough of Enfield to ascertain the best approach to implementing new policies concerning conditions of service. At Bovis UK, a project explored how to feed back information to managers more effectively on completed construction projects, while at Harlow College a study was undertaken to evaluate the use of IT across all college staff. Other projects may have an external focus on clients, for example, an investigation of borough residents’ perceptions of the effectiveness of a special educational needs service in the London Borough of Enfield; a proposal for increasing work for contractors at Bovis UK; and a proposal for developing Harlow College’s sports facilities for local community users. As well as being diverse in scope, covering both internal and external issues, and both local and cross-organisation ones, projects tend to focus either on policy, its development or implications, or on evaluating and enhancing practice. Examples of policy-focused projects are a proposal for a competency framework for a department in the London Borough of Enfield. At Bovis, an evaluation of the effectiveness of the in-house management development programme was undertaken, and at Harlow College research was done on how to further develop ICT provision for students. Examples of practice-based projects include improving revenue collection procedures in the London Borough of Enfield, improving completed project debriefing processes at Bovis UK and improving the tutorial support programme within a particular subject area at Harlow College.

While these are not mutually exclusive categories, they illustrate the diversity of research and development work undertaken by employee participants. The relevance of these projects to the organisation’s objectives is established early in an individual programme, in the learning agreement. Consequently, employer partners build up a valuable resource of research and development work over time, through the projects undertaken by their employees on work-based learning studies programmes. Projects typically involve analysing data from a range of sources within the organisation, both from surveys, interviews and focus groups run by the participants and from secondary data sources already existing in the organisation. The results are well-contextualised pieces of work-based research with practical import. For the individual participants, there is the achievement of both an academic award, which confirms their work-based expertise, and enhanced skills in project management and self-management of learning that they can use to further their learning and work in the future.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the incorporation of learning agreements into work-based learning studies programmes at Middlesex University has value both for partner organisations and for participating employees. Organisations have the opportunity to play a part in the customisation of the generic programme offered by Middlesex University, which ensures its relevance to strategic aims. At the central level, this may involve assisting in the design of the programme. This is the case in the Bovis programme, where the accreditation of in-house training was the first step in the development of a work-based Masters programme. At the local level, customisation operates through the requirement of line manager endorsement for individual participants’ learning agreement. This ensures operational relevance and is a feature of all three partnership programmes discussed in this paper. For individual participants, a work-based learning studies programme means the opportunity to study for a university award which is relevant to, and integrated with, work roles and to develop skills in the self management of learning.

Due to these possibilities for customisation, work-based learning studies programmes are a valuable training and development route for employees with a wide range of roles and abilities. Such programmes develop and deploy participants’ insider knowledge of the workplace in projects that lead to both practical local outcomes and relevance to strategic organisational objectives. This is achieved through the learning agreement in which the individual participant, the employing organisation and the university
negotiate and agree on their stake in a programme of work-based study.

References


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