Case Study

Generating individual learner profiles for work-based learners

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The background context

This case study is based upon Co-genT (Co-generative Toolkit), a JISC-funded Lifelong Learning and Workforce Development project led by the University of Gloucestershire, with partner institutions the University of Winchester, University of Worcester and the Western Vocational Lifelong Learning Network.

Higher education provision for work-based learning has been dominated by university-led provision. This has tended to follow a traditional paradigm and has been criticised by employers for not demonstrating any understanding of their needs and language.

Willis (2008, p32) identifies the need for higher education institutions (HEIs) to establish a framework 'designed to facilitate the accreditation, within higher education, of work based and work-related learning' as a means of ensuring academic integrity and flexibility within the system.

The current practice

In common with the sector as a whole, the University of Gloucestershire's work-based learning provision has been focused primarily on supporting individual learners to meet their personal and professional development needs through university delivered programmes.

Recognising the need for greater flexibility in provision the University of Gloucestershire validated its own accreditation framework, called the Gloucestershire Framework for Personal and Professional Development, in 2009. This framework is designed to allow maximum flexibility for employers and learners whilst maintaining academic standards.

It has the capacity to have nested within it small and distinct learning events such as continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities, standard module length credits and the ability to accommodate Employer-based Training Accreditation (EBTA). Awards can then be built up to include certificates and diplomas, Foundation Degree, Honours top-up and Masters level qualifications.

The Framework includes generic material, located within 'shell modules', which is necessary to meet the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education's regulatory Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ) (QAA, 2008) and allow for the delivery

of named awards. The Framework does enable assessment and 'delivery' through a mixture of work-based learning based on employment-related material, accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) and off-the-shelf modules.

These elements can be delivered via relevant departments in the University of Gloucestershire, other higher education providers, or employers. Co-genT is developing mechanisms to support the design and delivery of these flexible curricula.
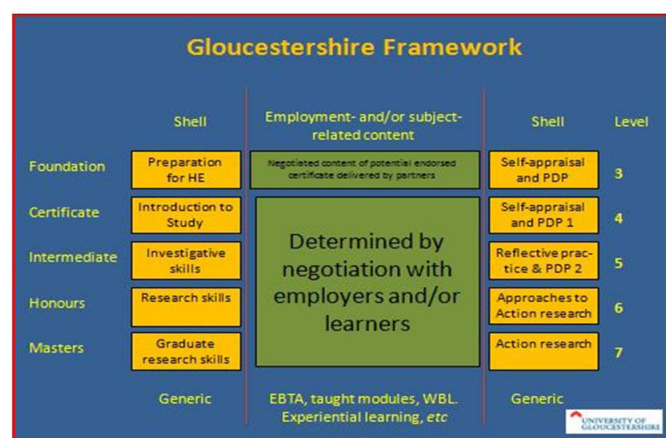
The challenge

The Government has strongly articulated a Business Community Engagement agenda for UK higher education. Within this agenda there are clear expectations for more flexible delivery modes and greater involvement of employers through the co-generation of curricula. A key challenge of this agenda is 'supporting the learner in 'translating' their prior and current achievements outside the university into a discourse whereby they can be recognised by the academic community' (Walsh, 2008, p15).

Co-genT is an action-research project which seeks to implement flexible delivery, in the broadest sense, through co-generated curricula and to investigate the processes involved. At the core of this project is the desire to encourage innovative curriculum development and delivery within the recognised quality assurance frameworks demanded by higher education. ePortfolios are central to the delivery mecha-

nisms envisaged for this project, providing the means to present the student with their individual requirements and the forum for presentation of evidence.

Eyres, Hooker & Pringle (2008, p99) observe that if 'positive responses to this agenda [workforce development] are to be embedded within institutions, it will require transformational

change to the traditional models of delivery in higher education'. In essence there is a need to develop procedures over and above the existing work-based learning provision which has been embedded within traditional curricula and associated processes.

Co-genT will address these gaps through development of a:

- set of procedures which facilitate flexibility and responsiveness within a rigorous academic framework that ensures appropriate standards are met;

- vocabulary to facilitate communication and alignment between academic standards and occupational standards;
- toolkit which supports the development of individual learning programmes delivered through the PebblePad eportfolio.

The approach

Co-genT is establishing processes and tools to exploit accreditation frameworks and provide more flexible forms of delivery and co-generation of curricula. It is developing tools to enable interaction between academia, employers, support staff and students in the development and delivery of negotiated curricula that will help translate employer requirements into academic outcomes.

Key elements within this overall process that will be developed through the project are: the creation of the vocabulary and outcome builders; generation of an individual learner profile; and integration of PebblePad and ELLI (Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory - http://www.el-lionline.co.uk/).

> **"** The vocabulary and outcome builders are tools developed to facilitate dialogue, and capture and share practice. **"**

The vocabulary, through the facilitation of dialogue between employers and academia, helps to map and align learning needs to academic level descriptors. The vocabulary has been created through the aggregation of level descriptors from the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (FHEQ), South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation & Transfer (SEEC) and the Northern Ireland Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (NICATS). Following this initial discussion and subsequent mapping to academic levels the outcome builder element can be used to generate learning

outcomes. This process helps to maintain an employer's language for these outcomes while ensuring the academic level has been identified. This tool allows learning outcomes at different levels – programme, unit, session, activity – to be generated.

The learning outcomes form the basis for generating an individual learner profile. A simple configurable toolkit enables curriculum designers, working with employers in a co-generative curriculum design process, to select skills, attributes, and/or outcomes that are automatically translated into learning profiles for curriculum design and personalised pathways for curriculum delivery. Drawing upon learning design frameworks the learner profile will make explicit to learners, through a visual representation, the

support and resources available to support their specific learning activities; in effect creating an individual programme specification for each student. This individual learner profile will be delivered to students through PebblePad, making clear to the students the evidence that will need to be collected to meet the identified outcomes and supplemented by the support and resource information.

In addition, the project is further developing the use of portfolio-based learning through the integration of personal development tools such as ELLI, which provides information about seven dimensions of learning: changing and learning; meaning making; curiosity; creativity; learning relationships; resilience; strategic awareness. This development also includes consideration of mentor training for staff, in order to support students in the interpretation of their ELLI profile.

The issues

Through this project a number of issues have emerged which have implications more generally for the provision of work-based learning. These could be grouped under the delivery of flexible learning opportunities and the design and assessment of flexible learning opportunities.

In considering the delivery of these new learning opportunities there is still a need to understand what is meant by the term 'work-based learner'. A move toward more flexible means of delivery will require a re-assessment of the view of the work-based learner and also work-based mentors.

To help ensure academic integrity and standards of this provision careful consideration of technologies for work-based learning is required.

All of this must then be underpinned by reflection on the pedagogies of work-based learning, to move away from the dualist language of

'chalk and talk' versus 'facilitation' to a 'brown field site' approach, where best practice from both traditional and more innovative pedagogies are valued.Designing and assessing flexible learning opportunities will require different systems to enable them, including the implementation and running of flexible credit frameworks and the impact of national initiatives such as the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR).

Fundamentally, the questions that also need to be addressed are: Where is the demand for these flexible forms of delivery? How can employers / professional bodies be engaged with this approach?

The result

This is a live project running until March 2011. At this stage of development the vocabulary and outcome builders are being piloted in different contexts.

While this project was initially conceived with a focus on work-based learning, the development of the vocabulary and outcome builders has highlighted the value of such tools for other applications in higher education.

These include use as a generic staff development tool to support the writing of learning outcomes and as a means for prospective higher education students to self-assess their own

skills and experience, so helping facilitate access to higher education.

In brief

This project is still at the development stage, however, it has already highlighted the importance of:

- Providing access to a consistent vocabulary to inform the dialogue around co-generation of curricula.
- A clear need for the development of a coherent vision by top level management across the whole of each institution to ensure that the structural, cultural and process changes involved in the introduction of work-based learning frameworks are adequately planned and co-ordinated.
- A need for pedagogic theorising to establish a basis in scholarship for work-based learning, eg. defining what 'work-based learning' means, what kind of curriculum design is involved, etc.
- Groundwork which will need to be done by sharing key issues across the sector, adopting a solutions-orientated approach to addressing the practical issues, and defining the principles, values and resources which underpin work-based learning as a field in HE.

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Acknowledgements