UVAC
UNIVERSITY VOCATIONAL AWARDS COUNCIL

Learning at Work: negotiated work-based learning in higher education

Dr Stan Lester

2026 Report Series

Welcome

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About UVAC

The University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) is one of the most authoritative voices on technical, vocational and professional education delivered by higher education and the leading expert on all aspects of the policy and operational requirements of higher and degree apprenticeships in England. UVAC is a membership body of around 80 UK universities and higher education providers and has been championing higher level technical and professional learning and progression routes into higher education and the professions for over 25 years. UVAC is known for its advocacy, representation and research, including work published in its official academic journal, Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning. In 2024, UVAC celebrated its silver jubilee.

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Contents

Summary 04
Preface 06
Introduction 07
01. Locating work-based learning 09
02. Underpinning principles 12
03. Underpinning practices 14
04. Staffing work-based learning 16
05. The institutional context 18
06. Learners and organisations 20
07. Current practices and perspectives 22
08. Commentary 26
Acknowledgements 28
Initials and acronyms 29
References 30
Appendix: UVAC 'Learning at Work' poster 35

Summary

Work-based learning' (WBL) is a broad term that can encompass "all and any learning that is situated in the workplace or arises directly out of workplace concerns" (Lester and Costley 2010, p562). It has also been used to include vocational and professional programmes such as apprenticeships, traineeships and integrated professional degrees that take place partly in the workplace, although more recently these have tended to be referred to as work-integrated learning (WIL). Here it is used to mean learning arising out of the 'work-space' that can form, or be incorporated into, a higher education programme. This kind of WBL is generally geared towards people who are already in the workforce, although its principles can be applied within relevant components of WIL programmes.

Higher education WBL is now well-established, building on among other things action learning, action research and independent study programmes dating back to the 1980s, the negotiated work-based learning projects of the 1990s, and subsequent developments within apprenticeship and professional development programmes. WBL can take the form of open programmes where individuals can negotiate their own pathways based on their work contexts and aspirations; programmes focussed on a particular field or application such as organisational change or advanced practice in a specific profession; and programmes negotiated with individual employers, from short interventions to full academic qualifications. It has been described as a field in its own right, with a distinct philosophical basis and 'signature pedagogy', as opposed to simply being a mode of learning within an existing academic or professional field.

The benefits of work-based learning to learners are widely documented, regardless of whether they are accessing higher education for the first time ... or are well-qualified and experienced professionals.

WBL principles

- **The learner is a self-directing agent**
- **Learning takes place in a concrete context and in relation to a community of practice**
- **Learning is in principle transdisciplinary – it grows out of the context rather than being limited to an academic or professional field**
- **Theory and practice interact with and build on each other**
- **Learning is validated through adequacy for real-world matters.**

WBL practices

- **Collaboration with employers**
- **Multiple entry criteria**
- **Recognition of previous learning**
- **Negotiation of focus, coverage and method**
- **Drawing learning out of work activities**
- **Authentic assessment**
- **Working with levels, credit and (internal) coherence**
- **Quality assurance that is consistent with WBL principles and practices.**

Implementing WBL necessitates a different approach from teaching and researching in an academic discipline or professional field. The WBL tutor will be involved in negotiating, supporting and assessing learning from practice, and will act as a facilitator, guide and expert resource rather than an academic subject-expert. Employer-based roles, such as programme sponsor, mentor and practitioner-academic, are also important in some types of WBL.

At institutional level, WBL can facilitate employer and community engagement, open up new markets and sources of income, contribute to the intellectual capital of the institution, and aid the institution to position itself in a way that is outwardly-focussed while remaining intellectually robust. It does however reflect a different paradigm from conventional academic teaching and research, and may be seen as challenging the institution's ownership of knowledge and the associated curricula. It also doesn't fit easily with standard institutional systems and procedures, and can be resource-intensive; successful programmes of WBL need to be managed effectively at a political as well as an operational level.

The benefits of WBL to learners are widely documented, regardless of whether they are accessing higher education for the first time perhaps without traditional entry qualifications, or whether they are well-qualified and experienced professionals, managers or entrepreneurs. Benefits to organisations often stem from the actions and development of individual learners, although they can also come from more deliberate corporate commitment that for instance builds a culture of learning and innovation throughout the organisation. Benefits can however easily be undermined if the organisation's culture discourages deeper learning or the questioning of established norms.

Negotiated or transdisciplinary WBL has to an extent faded into the background over the last decade with the rise of apprenticeships in higher education. There is however evidence of considerable latent demand for the more bespoke approach that it offers, particularly among SMEs and adult learners. Recent experience shows that WBL needs to be framed and marketed in a way that employers and learners can relate to, and programmes structured so that they are manageable, straightforward to negotiate and are clearly related to the needs of practice. Rather than promoting the 'design-your-own-degree' model of negotiated WBL, in many cases it can be more beneficial to emphasise for instance short action-based programmes and individual modules that can be tailored to specific needs, or programmes that focus on a particular application while being designed for negotiation into individual contexts.

Finally, the use of digital technology to support and facilitate WBL is now widespread if not always used as effectively as it could be. Recent developments such as generative AI offer the potential to improve support for learners, employers and academic staff, and free the latter from needing to spend time on more mundane aspects such as academic rules and protocols.

Preface

This paper provides a contemporary outline of negotiated work-based learning (WBL) as it applies in higher education. It draws on a long history of negotiated programmes and work-based learning in universities and other higher education institutions, including independent study and modular 'CATS' programmes; work-based projects, placements and dissertations in professional degrees; management and similar programmes based on 'action strategies'; more recent apprenticeship-based degrees and similar professional programmes; and in particular the fully bespoke, negotiated work-based programmes that emerged out of projects such as the Department for Employment-funded work-based learning projects of the early 1990s and the University for Industry 'Learning through Work' initiative at the turn of the century.

A major motivation behind the paper is that negotiated work-based learning as originally envisaged – based on the idea that an employer, individual or small group could negotiate a bespoke programme built around work activities, needs and aspirations – has, after a period of expansion in the early years of the millennium, gradually declined. Reasons for this decline included the resource-intensive nature of (particularly individually-) negotiated programmes, their uneasy fit with the dominant systems and practices of institutions, a significant increase in the cost to the learner of part-time higher education, and the rise of higher and degree apprenticeships accompanied by a levy system that for the most part made it more attractive to enrol staff on apprenticeships than to negotiate and pay for bespoke provision. Its consequences have included a falling-off of expertise in negotiated programmes and a reduction of universities' capacities to respond innovatively to the needs of businesses and individuals. What might be termed the 'golden era' of WBL development and research, which gathered pace in the 1990s, had largely come to a close by the mid-2010s. Nevertheless, the recent policy turn away from higher-level apprenticeships makes it timely for institutions to look at other ways of engaging with employers and supporting individuals' professional development, areas in which negotiated work-based learning has much to offer.

The paper necessarily provides a short and somewhat potted summary of the field, outlining some of the key principles, practices and issues. It doesn't aim to be comprehensive, report the latest research, engage in a deep level of critique, or provide an implementation manual; there is already a substantial literature covering both the theory and practice of work-based learning. It is also specifically British; a few sources come from outside the UK, but my aim is to provide an overview geared to higher education in the United Kingdom.

Stan Lester, July 2026

Introduction

A self-employed builder loads and configures a business software package, using help from online videos and discussion groups. A trainee nurse completes a ward round with an experienced colleague, making notes and identifying points for follow-up. An organisational development consultant frames a change exercise as a soft systems project, using the process to create learning both personally and within the client organisation. A newly-qualified surveyor is assigned a mentor to help gain familiarity with the organisation's ways of working and further develop professional expertise and judgement. A group of managers from different hospitality organisations hold regular meetings to discuss issues that they face, supporting each other to create solutions. A medical doctor encounters an unexpected development in a patient, reads up on it and seeks the opinions of colleagues before changing and monitoring the treatment. A personal coach reviews practice notes over several years, comparing them with current theories and research to develop and try out new ideas about coaching practice. A student on placement is given a task to work on, discussing and reviewing it with the supervisor at suitable intervals. Members of a farming family investigate, get advice on and assess different ways that they can diversify and add value to their enterprise. The chair of a volunteer committee reflects on the most recent meeting, deciding on a few things to do differently next time. A worker at a chemical factory spends a week on secondment to a sister plant that has started using some new techniques, explaining them to colleagues on return. A lecturer engages in online investigation and practical experimentation to make effective use of emerging digital technologies to support learning. A group of police officers attend a discussion session with a facilitator to improve the consistency of how they are interpreting a set of regulations. A trainee engineer inspects a structure for signs of fatigue, discussing observations and interpretations with a remote colleague who can follow the trainee's observations and add prompts over an augmented reality link.

All of these scenarios have in common that they are examples of work-based learning (WBL). There are many differences between them that could be expressed in terms such as level, amount, intensity, formality, purpose, routineness, locus of control, and learning approach, but all are based around some form of work activity and have a purpose that is oriented towards work, whether in terms of a specific application or improving practice more generally. Some activities are intentional with objectives identified in advance; others are more like learning 'on the fly' (Wofford *et al* 2013) or 'in the flow of work' (Lombardozzi 2016). While some are part of some form of wider learning sequence – the trainee nurse's round, the student's placement task, the engineer working with an experienced colleague – none are necessarily accredited as part of an academic programme.

Until relatively recently – for general applications the early 1990s is a good approximation – WBL was rarely seen as the concern of academic institutions. It could be complementary, either in the general sense of providing 'work experience' or in a more specific one of allowing knowledge to be applied and professional skills to be acquired and perhaps certificated, but the relationship between work-based learning and academic qualifications was at best vague. Even vocational qualifications such as those awarded by City & Guilds, RSA or BTEC, which typically incorporated a skills component, generally expected those skills to be demonstrated and at least partially learned in an off-job setting. Specialist certification apart, only with the advent of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) at the end of the 1980s did the workplace take on greater significance as a site of qualifying; nevertheless, the way these qualifications were specified did not translate easily to academic levels and criteria. Work-based learning might be expected to take place alongside an academic programme, via placements, or after the formal programme had finished, but the academic and working environments were kept as largely separate learning 'spaces'; these two aspects could be described as parallel worlds sometimes with cross-acknowledgement, but rarely with crossover.

More recently there has been a gradual opening up of academic accreditation to recognise both that the site of learning is less important than what is learned, and perhaps more fundamentally that knowledge generated in the workplace is not necessarily of lesser value or validity compared with that developed and codified in the academy. The roots of what can be termed 'work-based learning for academic credit' (the subtitle of a 1991 collection of papers by Adams *et al*) can be traced to several places, including the increasing acceptance in professional subjects of project and dissertation topics based on practical applications; the development of negotiated, modular degrees and independent study modules, notably pioneered by the Open University and the then North East London Polytechnic; the emergence of programmes, particularly for managers, based on action learning and other 'action strategies' (Raelin 1999); the appearance of reflective practice as a component in professional programmes; the recognition of 'experiential learning', as well as learning from 'non-academic' qualifications such as NVQs, for credit into academic programmes; and institutions' involvement in in-company programmes. Work-based learning in British higher education was given added impetus by a series of projects sponsored by the then Employment Department in the early 1990s (Duckenfield and Stirner 1992, Brennan and Little 1996), and might be described as coming of age at around the turn of the century with among other things the development of the University for Industry *Learning through Work* (LtW) initiative (Stephenson and Saxton 2005, and also see Little and Brennan 2006). At the same time work-based approaches were being extended to doctoral level, particularly in the UK and Australia (Stephenson *et al* 2006), extending professional doctorates to a model that is individual, research-and-development based, and concerned with creating a significant contribution to practice (Costley and Lester 2012).

Subsequently, the rise from the mid-2010s onwards of apprenticeships in higher education and the influence of levy funding has tended to focus attention away from the negotiated WBL model and towards more structured programmes. Apprenticeships have offered a different, more constrained and nevertheless in many circumstances highly effective form of work-oriented higher education (e.g. Lester and Bravenboer 2020, Lester 2026). They have had a positive impact in introducing more institutions to work-based higher education and emphasising the integration of learning and work, but a less positive one in reducing the diversity of work-based provision and encouraging institutions to rely on what has proved to be a fickle source of funding. With policy priorities now moving to lower-level and new-entrant apprenticeships, there are benefits to be had from revisiting and further developing other forms of work-based learning that can be more closely tailored to the needs of individuals and employers. The discussion that follows is focussed principally on work-based learning for existing workers at undergraduate and master's level, although many of the principles and points discussed also apply to work-based doctorates and to work-based components within apprenticeships and work-integrated degrees.

There are benefits to be had from revisiting and further developing … forms of work-based learning that can be more closely tailored to the needs of individuals and employers.

01. Locating work-based learning

Work-based learning has been described as "all and any learning that is situated in the workplace or arises directly out of workplace concerns" (Lester and Costley 2010, p562). This definition is useful in identifying what is not WBL, but too general to describe what might be admissible in a higher education context. Location in a 'workplace' can be expanded to include what has been called a "work-space" (Lester 2025, after Lefebvre 1991), which can be digital as well as physical, but is distinct from an "institutional space" (*ibid*) designed specifically for learning; Fergusson and van der Laan (2021) for instance refer to a "work environment or context" (p305) rather than a physical workplace, with the addition that 'work' is not confined to paid work. The second part of the definition distinguishes learning that responds specifically to a work issue or opportunity from that which has a general relationship to work. WBL can therefore include things that take place outside of the immediate work-space, but only where they relate directly to matters that arise in it. This creates a distinction from programmes designed to prepare students for a particular career or provide training in work-related skills, which might be described as work-related, vocational or professional rather than work-based, even if they use WBL components for part of the programme.

Applying WBL into a higher education context requires some further refinements. Perhaps the most critical is that the learning is of an appropriate level to be recognised towards (or as giving access to) a higher education award, followed by the need for it to amount to a sufficient volume of coherent learning to warrant academic credit. Importantly, this does not depend on the learner being in an 'appropriate' work role; while a complex, expansive and intellectually challenging role is more likely to provide fertile ground for substantial episodes of higher-level learning, it is also possible for learning at an appropriate level to be distilled out of more mundane and routine work.

Discussions of WBL in higher education tend to envisage three main contexts. The first relates to learning undertaken by people who are already in work and are, for various reasons, engaging with a university or other higher education institution. This was the main focus of early UK developments including action-based management programmes, the Employment Department-sponsored work-based learning projects, and the LtW initiative. It also tends to be assumed in many of the seminal texts on higher education WBL, including Boud and Solomon (2001), Lester and Costley (2010) and Garnett (2016), and is the main focus of the discussion here. The second context is accredited learning on placements or internships for students enrolled on full-time programmes, whether this comprises work experience modules or the in-depth professional training and experience that forms a major part of integrated professional degrees (e.g. Burke *et al* 2009, Billett 2015, Major 2016). A third context is provided by degree-bearing apprenticeships and similar programmes, which have variably been discussed as sitting closer either to the fully work-based model or to the placement one; a summary is provided by Garnett (2020).

More recently the term 'work-integrated learning' (WIL) has become used to refer particularly to programmes that include placements, as well as to apprenticeships. WIL has been defined as "approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully defined curriculum" (Patrick *et al* 2008, p. iv); its purpose can range from broadly-based learning relating to generic work experience, to focussed professional development through a practice placement ('tightly-coupled' WIL, after Ajjawi *et al* 2020). A distinction between WIL and WBL can be made in that a WIL programme has a predefined curriculum, while in WBL the 'curriculum' (for a module or a whole programme, at least at a detailed level) arises out of the work context and may be immanent and emergent (see figure 1). Apprenticeships have also been described as 'learning-integrated work' (LIW) (e.g. Garnett 2020, Lester 2026), emphasising their primary location in the work-space rather than the institutional space; Lester (op cit) describes LIW as "employment (that) is based around a defined programme of learning that integrates the practical and the theoretical and normally leads to some form of qualification or formal recognition" (p911). Within these programmes there are often components that are closer to the WBL model described here, although there are still some nominally integrated apprenticeships and professional degrees that provide academic education and work-based training in the 'parallel but separate' mode familiar from day- or block-release courses (Lester 2024).

01.

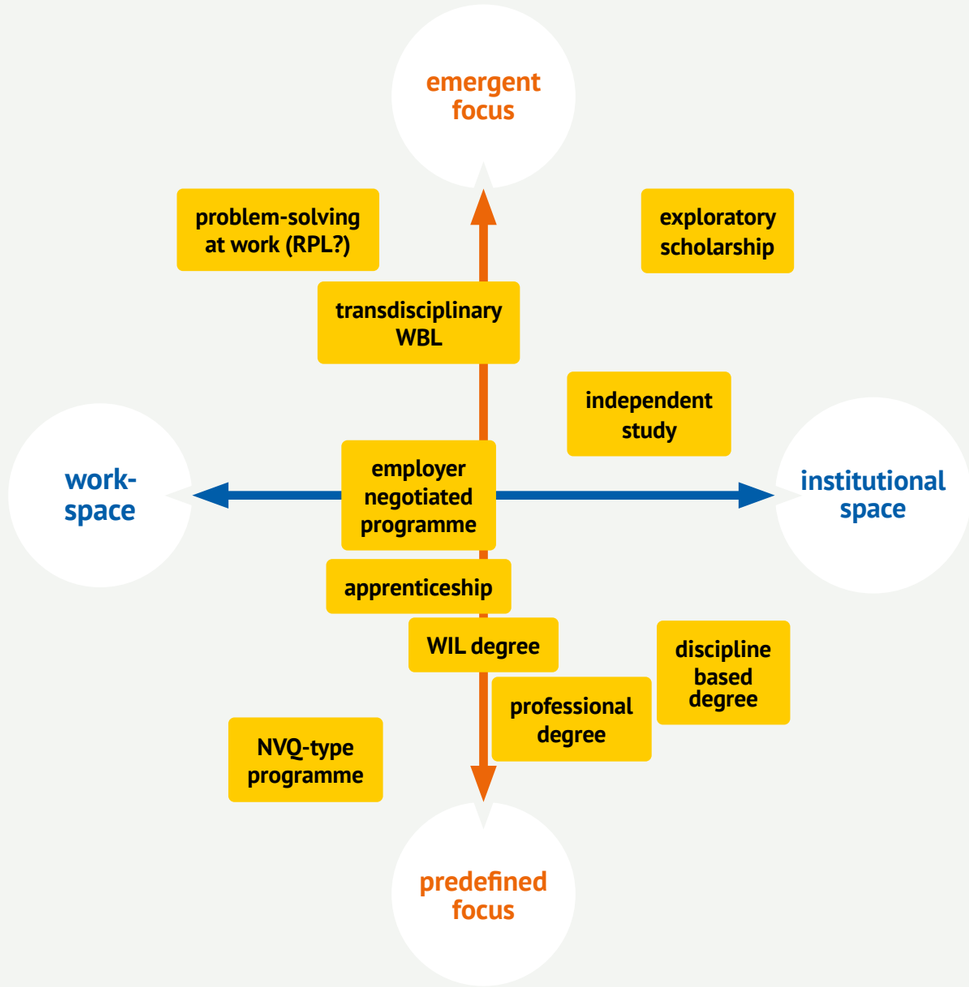
> **The programme or component is designed through negotiation between the learner, the institution and where relevant the employer or another party such as a professional body.**

One distinction that has been made is whether WBL is treated as what Costley and Armsby (2007) have referred to as a 'mode' or a 'field' of study. WBL as a 'mode of study' refers to working within an academic discipline or professional field, using work as one of the means of gaining the knowledge and capability associated with it. This is the more traditional use of WBL in vocational education and training, and it is also the dominant approach within many WIL and LIW programmes where there is a curriculum associated with preparation for a career or certification in a profession. Conversely, when approaching WBL as a 'field of study' (and see Gibbs and Garnett 2010) the 'curriculum' is left open and emerges out of the work concerns, objectives and aspirations of the individual or work group. While this approach can be drawn on within a WIL or LIW context, for instance in modules intended to support work projects, action learning or reflection, it developed through applications for people with substantial experience of work or whose programme is built around a major work project of some form (e.g. Stephenson and Saxton 2005, Lester and Costley 2010). It is often described as 'negotiated work-based learning' (NWBL), where the programme or component is designed through negotiation between the learner, the institution and where relevant the employer or another party such as a professional body.

The diagram in figure 1 provides a means of locating different forms of learning (whether full programmes, smaller components or general learning activities) in two dimensions. The X-axis indicates to what extent learning is associated with the institutional space or the work-space, while the Y-axis is concerned with the extent to which the focus is emergent or predetermined (whether as an institutional curriculum or by external standards such as those of an apprenticeship specification or professional certification framework). The programmes and activities shown are examples, and not all will conform to the suggested positioning: for instance an employer-negotiated programme that has a more predefined focus, or a subject-based degree that leaves substantial room for negotiation. Other dimensions can be added, for instance relating to the extent to which learning is integrated between the work and institutional spaces, acknowledging that this can differ considerably even within nominally similar programmes (e.g. Lester 2024). Taken together these dimensions offer a way of looking at work-based and work-related learning in a way that moves away from simple classification into work-related, work-based, work-integrated, work-applied and so on (cf. Costley 2021, Fergusson and van der Laan 2021).

01.

FIGURE 1: **Dimensions of learning**



Underpinning principles

02.

Work-based learning has been influenced by a number of theoretical perspectives, with different approaches to WBL emphasising these to different extents. An examination of contemporary accounts of WBL, from for instance Stephenson and Saxton (2005) and Lester and Costley (2010) through to Fergusson *et al* (2024), suggest five recurring principles that can be applied to most contexts:

The learner is a self-directing agent. One of the most fundamental perspectives underpinning WBL concerns the agency, individuality and motivation of learners. Much of this is reflective of adult education theory, particularly Dewey's democratic pragmatism (Dewey 1916, 1938) and Knowles' concept of andragogy (Knowles 1970). Dewey viewed learners as free agents with diverse characteristics and needs, continually learning and growing through experiences and interactions and their consequences. Knowles saw adult learners as internally motivated and self-directed; practical; motivated by relevance to their own goals; and as bringing existing experience and knowledge to learning. These themes are reflected, or form a tacit assumption, in much of the literature on WBL both as it applies to learners already in work (e.g. Tennant 2004, Lester and Costley 2010) as well as those in more structured programmes (e.g. Stephenson 1998). A consequence of this principle is that WBL programmes and components need to respect the diverse starting-points of learners, be open to different approaches to learning, and recognise that learning outcomes are individual and may not be predictable in advance.

Learning takes place in a concrete context and a community of practice. An important facet of work-based learning is that it is situated in a specific context that influences both the focus and process of learning, in contrast to mainstream academic learning that is at least in principle context-independent and abstract. Part of the context will involve a community of practice, or multiple communities of practice, such as the learner's work group or professional peers. Lave and Wenger (1991) discuss situated learning and communities of practice principally in terms of apprentices' enculturation and early-career learning; both concepts are at least as relevant to established workers, who may engage with multiple contexts and communities some of which may be easily defined (e.g. work colleagues and professional or trade groups) and some less so (e.g. informal networks, internet discussion groups and client communities). An implication of this is that WBL needs to recognise and make use of the context of learning; this will sometimes involve using formal means such as tripartite learning agreements, but it will always recognise that the individual's learning is shaped by its context.

Learning is organised around the context rather than an academic or professional field. While academic learning generally starts from the content associated with a discipline or field, WBL is shaped by issues, goals and opportunities presented by the work context. This context-driven learning may draw on (sometimes multiple) disciplinary or professional fields in a fairly straightforward way, but it often requires thinking that is not constrained by academic or professional boundaries. WBL is therefore largely transdisciplinary in principle (Nicolescu 2008, and see Gibbs 2015 for a set of discussions in the context of work-based learning and practice); it should draw on the knowledge that is most appropriate and complete for the matter in hand. This kind of learning emphasises 'Mode 2' knowledge (Gibbons *et al* 1994), with the purpose of feeding back into practice. However, for academically-validated WBL the principle also applies that while learning is necessarily situated, it also has implications that go beyond the immediate context.

> **Work-based learning is shaped by issues, goals and opportunities presented by the work context, (rather than by) the content associated with a discipline or field.**

02.

Theory and practice interact with and build on each other. A basic principle of WBL is that practice is more than the application of knowledge; it generates knowledge, which feeds back into practice, creating further knowledge, and so on. This dynamic conception of theory and practice, often represented as a cycle or spiral, is present in Schön's idea of constructionism (Schön 1983, 1987), Revans' principles for action learning (Revans 1980), Lewin's concept of action research (Lewin 1946) and Kolb's familiar learning cycle (Kolb 1986); it is also a central idea in Raelin's conception of work-based learning (Raelin 1997). The idea of transdisciplinarity suggests that the knowledge that is drawn out of practice can be more than simply 'horizontal' knowledge associated with practice itself (after Bernstein 1999), and can have more fundamental implications that go beyond the context of production; this is particularly apparent when work-based learning extends to doctoral level (e.g. Lester 2012). Epistemologically, this principle can be related to the idea of epistemic maturity (Kitchener and King 1981), in which notions of knowledge evolve through objective and subjective conceptions to a perspective that values what is most complete and usable, and enables the practitioner or practice community to create 'maps that work' (Korzybski 1958).

Work-based learning is validated through its adequacy for real-world matters. The primary criterion for whether WBL is valid is whether it supports effective action, not whether it covers a defined curriculum or allows the learner to meet a set of competence standards. WBL may be focussed on an immediate issue, or more general capability to act effectively in a practice situation. At university level it should do more than provide general principles or skills for application to practice, and have value outside of the immediate time and context in which it takes place. At the higher levels of the academic spectrum learning might be expected to be adequate for working with 'wicked problems' (Rittel and Webber 1973), 'messes' (Ackoff 1974) and 'swamps' (Schön 1987); these are situations that are not amenable to applying neat technical solutions, may require the balancing of different interests and ethical perspectives, and require practitioners to engage with "a mix of indeterminate problems, pieces that don't fit and people who don't behave according to the theory" (Lester and Costley 2010, p567).

03. Underpinning practices

A number of practices have developed around work-based learning that are now considered fairly commonplace, if varying in importance depending on the type of programme. Taken with the principles outlined in the previous section, these can be considered as a 'signature pedagogy' for work-based learning (after Dalrymple *et al* 2014).

Collaboration with employers Work-based learning typically involves a partnership arrangement between an institution, one or more employers, and individual learners – sometimes referred to as a tripartite relationship – although how this works will depend on the type of WBL programme. In open programmes the primary relationship may be with the learner, with employers sometimes becoming drawn in via work-based projects and similar activities after the programme has started. Learners may also be largely independent, for instance as self-employed workers, or self-managing professionals or leaders; here it may be possible for colleagues or clients to become involved, or this may not be appropriate or feasible. In other examples the primary relationship is with the employer, who may be responsible for initiating and negotiating the programme for their staff, engage with an existing programme, or provide recurring placements, internships or project opportunities. Employer involvement can span the strategic (business objectives and overall programme design), operational (inputs, mentoring, assessment etc.) or purely supportive (for instance supporting projects and ensuring access to resources). For employer-specific programmes the employer will often have a strong role in design and delivery, while the institution needs to ensure that the programme meets academic standards.

Multiple entry criteria Work-based programmes generally have broader entry criteria than other higher education courses, reflecting for instance Stephenson and Saxton's (2005) observations that many WBL entrants lack traditional HE entry qualifications. Typically, there is a need for 'recognitional' (Bravenboer 2012) or 'strength-based' (Saville *et al* 2020) criteria, that look for evidence of ability to benefit from the programme rather than emphasising only formal achievements; for apprenticeships at least, there is some evidence that this approach can be a better predictor of success than academic or vocational qualifications (*ibid*). Where programmes are designed for cohorts from specific employers, formal entry criteria may not arise if the programme is designed according to the needs and starting-points of a known group. On the other hand, for open WBL programmes potential learners' experience of work and opportunities to learn from practice can be at least as important as their academic qualifications.

Recognition of previous learning Recognition of previous learning (RPL) has become a mainstream part of much WBL, both to aid establishing an appropriate entry-point and to provide credit within a programme (see for instance Garnett and Cavaye 2015). Typically, much of this learning will be experience-based and otherwise unaccredited, although for postgraduate programmes professional recognition can provide evidence of readiness to work at the relevant level. Garnett (1998) notes that in WBL, RPL moves from having to demonstrate equivalence to a predefined curriculum or unit specification to showing relevance to and coherence with the overall programme as negotiated with the learner or employer. RPL can be treated simply as an evidencing exercise to establish the relevant entry-point (e.g. direct entry to level 6 in an undergraduate programme), but RPL within programmes is more often treated as a learning process in its own right, designed to develop reflection and act as a foundation for future learning (Armsby *et al* 2006). A clear distinction between 'RPL' and forward learning may also not always be possible, for instance where a portfolio of work or completed project is built on or evaluated as all or part of the programme (Chisholm and Davis 2007, Lester 2007, 2012).

Negotiation of focus, coverage and method Negotiation plays a major role in WBL, whether this is the explicit, whole-programme negotiation of the 'design-your-own-degree' approach promoted through LtW (Stephenson and Saxton 2005), or the more local negotiation involved in interpreting a programme component into a specific work and personal context. Whole-programme negotiation can be done through a programme-level learning agreement that typically sets out what the programme is aiming to achieve for the learner and where relevant the employer, its overall focus, key learning objectives, previous learning that can be brought in, and how learning will take place and how it will be assessed (Anderson *et al* 1998). This type of agreement is complex and likely to be built up over the early stages of the programme, becoming a flexible 'living document' that is revisited and revised as the programme progresses; experience indicates that requiring everything to be thought through in detail at the outset can be daunting to many learners and is probably unnecessary (see section 7). Local or component-level negotiation can similarly result in a learning agreement, or it can be less formal in approach, closer to a learner and tutor agreeing the subject of a project or dissertation. Negotiation is often three-way (learner, university, employer), with some caution that while employer interests need to be accommodated, they should not override those of the learner or the programme's academic principles (e.g. Gibbs 2009).

03.

> **A major theme in work-based learning is the contribution of action in the work-space to academically-accredited learning.**

Drawing learning out of work activities A major theme in WBL is the contribution of action in the work-space to academically-accredited learning. A distinction needs to be made between the action itself, which may be successful or not, and what is learned from it. Typically this learning is drawn out and legitimised through activities such as recording, dialogue, reflection, evaluation and research of various kinds. Beyond awareness of relevant theories as discussed in the previous section, this will usually include appropriate methodological guidance and 'scaffolding': for instance on reflection at different levels of immersion and detachment (e.g. Nabi and Somerville 2025), processes for action-based learning strategies (e.g. McGill and Brockbank 2003), and where relevant more formal methods for work-based research or research and development (e.g. Costley *et al* 2010, Checkland and Poulter 2006).

Authentic assessment A tension that can occur in higher education WBL is the extent to which material put forward for assessment can be purely the outputs of work, and to what extent it needs to be 'academic'. Problems can arise with the former if work products do not draw out either the thinking or learning involved at a sufficient level of depth, and with the latter if 'academic' is interpreted as presented in a conventional academic format or as needing to conform to criteria that are discipline-based or otherwise not sufficiently flexible (see for instance Yorke's 2011 discussion of 'realist' and 'relativist' criteria). Authentic assessment in this context will typically reflect adequacy for real-life application at the relevant level; make direct use of work practice and products; require reflection and engagement between theory and practice; and require a measure of reflexivity and (self-) evaluation (Ashford-Rowe *et al* 2014, Fergusson *et al* 2022). Ajjawi *et al* (2020) usefully caution against constructing academic tasks relating to practice, rather than drawing on more immersive opportunities that work practice provides directly; for instance they comment that reflection as an exercise can be detached and lead to post-hoc justification, rather than involving a usefully critical and constructive examination of the relevant practice and practice context.

Working with levels, credit and (internal) coherence Many WBL programmes expose staff, and often also learners and employers, to needing to understand principles of academic levels, credit, and programme design. This can be mitigated when working with individual components or nominally prestructured programmes, but agreeing a WBL programme or major component will require answers about whether the proposed learning matches the qualification level being sought, whether it is sufficient in terms of volume, and whether it adds up to a coherent whole. An important point in relation to negotiated or 'field of study' WBL is that coherence needs to be seen from the perspective of the learner and their context, rather than from that of a professional field or academic discipline. Level will normally be referenced to one of the standard academic levels, but to do this accurately and fairly a set of level indicators may be needed that reflect a work-based context (see for instance Workman 2009); the most recent SEEC descriptors (SEEC 2021) were written to be inclusive of WBL, while LtW developed an early set of indicators that were intended to locate both planned and prior episodes of WBL into an academic level framework.

Quality assurance that supports WBL principles and practices Basic academic principles point to the same standards of quality assurance needing to be applied to WBL as to other provision, but as now recognised by the Quality Assurance Agency this does not mean that QA needs to follow identical processes or use the same success criteria (Lester *et al* 2016). A problem that has arisen fairly commonly is that while some aspects of WBL can score highly in terms of modern definitions of academic quality, there has been a tendency to view WBL as a 'mode of study' from a discipline-oriented paradigm rather than seeing it as a transdisciplinary field, and apply inappropriate criteria and measures as a consequence (Garnett 2009). This can be a particular problem if quality measures do not distinguish WBL programmes for existing workers from placements and professional training; for instance the most recent QAA guidance (QAA 2018) is still quite broad and not particularly reflective of the former. Appropriate QA needs to be based on well-understood and robust processes, reflect the contextual, individual and partnership-based nature of WBL, be rooted in the underpinning principles of WBL, and reinforce the 'signature pedagogy' outlined above. Typically this will involve collaboration between institution and employer, a thorough risk assessment by the institution, and quality embedded in institutional and partnership practices rather than being viewed as a set of procedures to be complied with (Garnett 2008, Talbot *et al* 2014).

04. Staffing work-based learning

Work-based learning practice requires a substantially different approach from teaching in an academic or professional field, with the WBL literature broadly agreeing that the tutor or core staff role changes from being primarily one of subject-expert and teacher to being a facilitator, guide and expert resource (e.g. Lester and Costley 2010). WBL tutors typically need to develop expertise in the principles and processes involved in negotiating, supporting and assessing learning from practice, negotiating with and supporting employers, as well as matters such as levels, credit, awards, and assessment criteria and processes. Major *et al* (2011) comment that the transition from subject lecturer to WBL tutor typically takes around two years, and staff can need to undergo a paradigm-shift to accept the transdisciplinary approach inherent in WBL (Talbot and Lilley 2014). Even where staff are acting more purely as expert resources, they may need time and support to become familiar with how WBL differs from standard subject-based or professional programmes. The value of WBL tutors having sector-specific knowledge and insights may vary from essential (for instance for at least some staff on an in-house programme for an employer immersed in a specific sector), to minimal (on generic WBL programmes or modules); in some instances broad management or professional practice experience can be valuable, although successful WBL tutors and leaders have come from a wide range of academic backgrounds.

The rise of apprenticeships and other integrated professional programmes (such as those now common in the health sector) has highlighted two further roles that have variable relevance to WBL more generally. Practitioner-academics or 'pracademics' (Forster *et al* 2023) may be employed in the work organisation while also having a formal status in the university, employed jointly, or employed by the university and seconded to the organisation. Practitioner-academics are familiar in medicine and other health professions, but are appearing in other fields where there are close relationships between employer and institution; this may be through a formal agreement, but can also be on an individual basis for instance through the practitioner undertaking a work-based postgraduate programme and staying involved with the university. Practitioner-academics may perform a variety of roles including supporting learners, acting as mentors, carrying out assessment, undertaking research, and contributing to the strategic aspects of the employer-institution relationship. They are likely to be most relevant in employer-driven and profession- or sector-specific programmes; in open and individually-driven programmes their role may be more informal and incidental, but potentially important as part of a WBL community that bridges between the institution and the workplace.

04.

> **The tutor or core staff role changes from being primarily one of subject-expert and teacher to being a facilitator, guide and expert resource.**

The second role has arisen out of mandated review processes in apprenticeships. Referred to by many titles but usefully described as the 'tripartite practitioner' (Charlton and Power-Mason 2026), this role has the job of bridging between discipline-based staff, the employer and the learner, and specifically carrying out the three-way review meetings that are required for apprenticeships. It has been formalised in some institutions, sometimes on a lower grade than a lecturer and often on a part-time contract (*ibid*). Outside apprenticeships this or a comparable role is sometimes used for practice placements, but it rarely appears in full WBL programmes. While tripartite staff may be able to liaise more effectively with employers than university-based academics, their use is not unproblematic; many such staff have a very high workload, there can be tension between acting as administrators and recorders and using the review process as a learning conversation, and the use of tripartite staff can reduce the need for academic colleagues to engage with the workplace (Lester *et al* 2021, Power-Mason *et al* 2026).

Finally, employer staff. Some WBL programmes will have a sponsor in the employer organisation, typically a senior manager, who may underwrite a complete programme, sponsor staff on an open programme, set up a placement or internship opportunity, or sponsor an individual learner. This may be the point of contact for strategic matters for the programme, though not usually for operational processes. Individual learners are more likely to have a mentor, typically someone in the same organisation (or sometimes external but in the same professional field) who is more experienced and can support the learner on a regular basis; Arnold *et al* (2011) comment that this is often the person who is best-placed and has capacity, rather than necessarily the learner's immediate manager or other more obvious colleague. Lester *et al* (2021), drawing on Dunne *et al* (2008), Evans *et al* (2010) and Roberts *et al* (2019), describe the role of the mentor as variously providing an insight into the workplace; signposting and ensuring access to learning opportunities and resources in the workplace; mediating between the learner and managers or other colleagues; acting as a coach or sounding-board; helping the learner to recontextualise theoretical knowledge; helping the learner balance learning with other commitments; acting as a bridge between the workplace and the university; working with the learner and the tutor to review progress, encourage reflection and agree future objectives; and supporting the learner to become more independent in managing their learning (p13). Which of these functions are relevant will depend on the type of WBL programme, the stage of development of the learner, and pragmatically the time and resources available to the mentor.

Staff development for mentors appears to be variable, other than for those involved in professional training in fields such as nursing and social work, where it may be a requirement of the professional association or regulator (Lester *et al* 2016). Many universities involved in WBL, apprenticeships or work-integrated degrees have developed courses for mentors, but uptake has still been reported as lower than might be hoped, particularly for face-to-face programmes away from the workplace (*ibid*.). Support for mentors can also be lacking in their own organisations, particularly where the mentor role is not formalised (Quew-Jones and Rowe 2022). In WBL programmes where the mentor role is important, attention will normally be needed to ensuring that mentors have adequate development and support.

The institutional context

05.

Work-based learning has tended to have an uneasy relationship with the dominant perspectives, systems and structures within higher education institutions. It has been seen as a 'disturbing practice' (Boud 2001), a challenge to the disciplinary structure and epistemological legitimacy of universities (Garnett 2016), and (in the context of apprenticeships) 'creatively disruptive' (Bravenboer 2019). On the other hand it can generate commercial income, provide a vehicle for engagement with employers and local economies, contribute to the intellectual and structural capital of the institution (Garnett 2001), and, particularly when extended to doctoral level, offer a distinctive platform from which the institution can promote itself (Graham and Smith 2002). Points of contention between work-based learning and the way that institutions are set up, both conceptually and practically, have been quite widely explored; they can be summarised as follows.

Epistemological and pedagogical considerations. The absence of content based on academic disciplines or recognised professional fields, and the consequent lack of a curriculum in the conventional sense, challenges traditional institutional perspectives and can be viewed as an attempt to remove control of the curriculum from the institution (Foster and Stephenson 1998, Garnett 2016). Work-based knowledge can be difficult to position and codify in the university , and the lack of predefined content or conventional pedagogical (including assessment) practices can lead to accusations that WBL is insufficiently academic (Costley and Armsby 2008). Strong counter-arguments have been developed that WBL can be both epistemologically sound (see for instance Gibbs' 2015 collection) and academically robust (Garnett 2009), with the latter commenting on the excellent evaluations of some WBL programmes. There is nevertheless still a danger that poorly conceptualised or implemented WBL can lead to what Scott *et al* (2004) term the 'reverse colonisation' of the academy by the values of the workplace, highlighting a need to safeguard intellectual rigour and academic standards (Minton and Whitemore 2011).

> **Work-based or action-based learning units have generally been welcomed in the(ir) early stages … but become problematic when they (start) making demands on the structure and operating paradigms of the institution.**

Differences in approaches and systems. University systems and structures are generally designed around the need to manage large groups of full-time students following subject-based courses, and to undertake discipline-based research. Activities that fall outside of this but remain close to it, such as part-time courses and cross-disciplinary research, can be accommodated as variations on the standard theme. Work-based learning however suggests a need to move from the 'delivery systems' or producer-consumer model that is designed to provide standardised courses to a fairly homogeneous population of students, to 'realisation systems' or co-production, based on collaboration with learners and employers to create individual solutions (Lester 2002). This can stretch institutional (and national higher education) systems and structures beyond what they were designed to accommodate, leading to a mix of modification, compromise and conflict (cf. Garnett 2016); it can also lead to additional costs through the need to work around or adapt standard institutional procedures so that they are suitable for WBL.

Costs and resources. Individually-negotiated WBL programmes have often been regarded as expensive and resource-intensive. One-to-one time is needed to understand the learner's context, support and review claims for recognition of previous learning, negotiate (and sometimes renegotiate) the programme, and develop, review and assess projects; one senior academic involved in the *Learning through Work* initiative described this as intensive as supervising a PhD but with learners who were often less clued in. Institutions' responses include minimising individual WBL or standardising as many components as possible, although there is also evidence that costs need not be a prohibitive factor when programmes are well-designed and operated (e.g. Talbot *et al* 2020).

In practice, WBL has had mixed success in institutions. The presence of work-based or action-based learning units have generally been welcomed in the early stages of development as something outside the mainstream that could offer a source of innovation, growth and alternative income, but become problematic when they have expanded to the point of making demands on the structure and operating paradigms of the institution. O'Reilly's account of the rise, success and subsequent dismantling of a similar type of enterprise, the School of Independent Study at the former North East London Polytechnic (O'Reilly 1993, 2001), provides a case in point, while Major (2016) and Talbot *et al* (2020) chart the more successful though not unproblematic trajectory of WBL at Chester. These experiences, together with those of other institutions involved in WBL (e.g. Garnett *et al* 2009) and with apprenticeships (e.g. Quew-Jones 2023), raise questions about how WBL is organised and framed within institutions. Table 1 is a summary of some of the possible models.

05.

TABLE 1: Examples of WBL arrangements within institutions.

WBL is provided by a central unit or school, where necessary drawing on additional expertise from faculties.	Can provide strong central impetus for WBL, promote common systems and efficiency, and facilitate arrangements with external partners. May compete with faculties and hinder local ownership. Can be vulnerable to changes in central policy.
WBL is led by a central unit within an existing faculty, e.g. a business school.	Can work similarly to the above with less vulnerability to central policy, but may be less able to influence uptake in other faculties.
WBL is led by a small central unit, which works with faculties to develop relevant programmes, and provides support and advice.	Can promote a common approach while allowing local ownership and flexibility. Influence can be variable across faculties and departments. May still be vulnerable to policy changes, but possibly less exposed than a large central operation.
WBL is led independently at faculty or department level.	Different approaches may develop in different parts of the university, and expertise can become fragmented. May be better able to build on relationships with specific professions and industry sectors.
WBL is developed in isolated pockets as an initiative for specific programmes, e.g. an action learning programme for small business development or an action research programme for advanced professional development.	Can be tailored to very specific needs. May 'fly under the radar' of wider policy, but also lead to difficulties in the department or programme team gaining acceptance for non-standard approaches.

06. Learners and organisations

For WBL to be successful it might be expected not only to lead to qualifications or credit, but to provide worthwhile benefits both for individual learners and for employers (or learners' businesses). Evaluations of WBL indicate that this is generally the case, with a few caveats. The reporting of individual benefits is universal, with many of these carrying over directly into benefits to the business or organisation. Organisational benefits may also accrue from more general involvement in WBL, beyond those coming from individuals' learning. Nevertheless misalignment between organisational expectations and work cultures on the one hand, and WBL programmes on the other, has been shown to limit learning and in some cases lead to conflicts between learners and their managers and organisations.

Accounts of WBL from Boud and Solomon (2001) and Stephenson and Saxton (2005) through to Fergusson *et al* (2024) and Barr (2025) indicate that work-based learners are highly diverse. Significant cohorts come from a number of sources, including:

- Managers, including senior managers and business owners, in large and smaller organisations.
- Self-employed professionals, as well as those in what might be described as self-managing roles in organisations.
- Single-organisation cohorts linked to in-company development or specific interventions such as change initiatives or organisational/business development programmes.
- 'Progressing professionals' looking to further their careers through ongoing development, usually at postgraduate level.
- Workers in assistant-type roles, including in teaching, engineering and the health service, looking to progress to the next level; these may be newcomers to higher education or topping up from for instance an HNC/D or foundation degree to a full degree.
- Students on professionally-oriented degrees and apprenticeships, where a work-based component or series of components is used to integrate academic and practical learning and provide a vehicle for formalising learning in the work-space.

A notable finding by Stephenson and Saxton (2005) was that of the first learners enrolling via the LtW framework (a total of 1326 individuals), 60% lacked the qualifications that would normally be required for university entrance, and some of these were accepted directly on to postgraduate programmes on the basis of their experience. On the other hand many work-based learners are already well-qualified academically and professionally, and may be motivated as much by the direct impact of the programme on their careers, businesses or areas of interest as by the credential offered.

Evaluations of work-based learning indicate that benefits for individual learners are broadly similar regardless of work roles or starting-points. Common themes, drawing on Stephenson and Saxton (2005), Nixon *et al* (2008), Lester and Costley (2010) and Abukari and Costley (2015), include:

- Enhancement of work-related and personal competence, often leading to improved practice or work effectiveness.
- Improved personal and professional confidence, assuredness and self-efficacy.
- Improved motivation and higher aspirations.
- A positive impact on work relationships.
- Improved credibility and recognition.
- Enhanced insights into work and organisational matters.
- Greater willingness to reflect, think things through and challenge.
- A greater propensity to take on responsibility and take the initiative.
- Material benefits such as promotion, pay rises and expanding or re-orienting the learner's business.

While WBL can be a powerful means of providing access to higher education and progression beyond basic work roles, at the opposite end of the scale a strong and sometimes life-changing impact has been noted on independent professionals and senior managers, even if they are already highly qualified (e.g. Stephenson and Saxton 2005, Abukari and Costley 2015, Rowe *et al* 2023).

06.

The reporting of individual benefits is universal, with many of these carrying over directly into benefits to the business or organisation.

For organisations, involvement in higher education WBL can stem from a business perspective either as part of a staff development strategy or in response to specific needs or opportunities ranging from organisational change or business development to increasing in-house capacity, innovation or professional credibility. It can also be locally-driven or responsive, for instance where the initiative is taken by individuals on their own account or on behalf of small teams or project groups. Employers have commented that WBL is highly flexible, can address immediate as well as longer-term issues, cover matters not easily accessed elsewhere in the education and training system, and be focussed on addressing particular organisational needs (Stephenson and Saxton 2005, Durrant *et al* 2009). Many of the benefits to organisations are identified as accruing from individual benefits, so for instance work-based learners become more effective, professional and motivated; better able to anticipate needs and opportunities, and support the organisation's objectives and strategic direction; and more loyal and likely to remain with the organisation, particularly if it can support their career development. Credentials acquired through WBL can also enhance the credibility and prestige of the organisation. Direct benefits are noted particularly from WBL projects (Ions and Minton 2012, Abukari and Costley 2015), action-based learning approaches (Ashridge Trust 2008), or where programmes are geared to business development needs (Stephenson and Saxton 2005); these may have a direct impact through work done within the programme, as well as promoting a more general culture of learning among colleagues and in the organisation. From a longer-term perspective, WBL has been reported as contributing to the intellectual capital and innovation capacity of organisations (Garnett 2001), aiding organisational change (Lester and Costley 2010), and contributing to strategic direction (Nixon *et al* 2008).

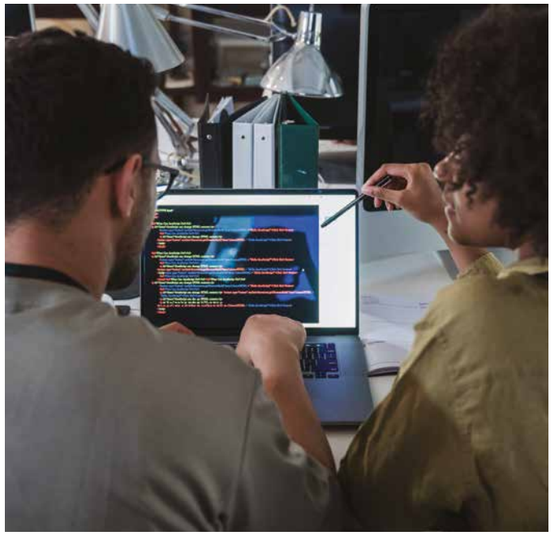
A caveat is needed in that the advantages of work-based learning both to individuals and employers can be undermined substantially if organisational actions and values are out of step with those of the programme. The idea of 'restrictive' and 'expansive' work environments is discussed by Fuller and Unwin (2008) in relation to apprenticeships. Similar principles apply to work-based learning more generally: where learners are not supported appropriately to learn or make use of their learning, discouraged from questioning practices, policies or decisions, and not encouraged to develop beyond immediate job requirements or participate in meaningful communities of practice, the results are frustrating and limiting for individuals, and not conducive to producing organisational benefits. This can be a particular problem when WBL is approached purely as a means of credentialling workers, or passively as sponsoring staff on university courses. Examples of mismatches between organisational and programme expectations are given by Gustavs and Clegg (2005), Moore (2007) and Siebert and Costley (2014), with outcomes that include increasing mistrust between learners and their managers, game-playing to appear to stay within organisational norms while engaging with the programme, and learners moving out of the organisation to develop their careers elsewhere. Problems have also been reported where WBL becomes too tied to the objectives of the organisation and lacks a more critical perspective, leading to self-limiting strategies on the part of learners (e.g. Zembylas 2006, Gibbs 2009).

Current practices and perspectives

07.

Contemporary WBL practice includes a mix of 'traditional' employer- and individually-negotiated work-based programmes, that have continued to thrive (or at least potter along in the background) alongside the growth of apprenticeships; action-based programmes for specific groups such as managers, entrepreneurs and members of individual professions; programmes that are sector-specific and, on the surface, more structured, but are designed to be interpreted and applied into individual contexts; components designed to support placements, internships and workplace learning in apprenticeships and work-integrated degrees; and apprenticeship programmes for experienced workers, often managers, that have been designed or adapted to be applied into individual work contexts and support objectives that go beyond those of the standard apprenticeship specification. Since the 'golden era' of WBL development, roughly the period from 1995 to 2015, WBL developments and expertise have become more distributed (or perhaps scattered), but also more diverse.

To help draw together some of this current WBL experience and thinking, a series of discussions were held via UVAC in early 2026 with practitioners with WBL experience in higher education institutions. Individual remote conversations were held with eight practitioners representing 7 institutions, followed by an online seminar and discussion group with 19 participants (10 institutions); of these five had taken part in the initial discussions. A poster was used to prompt discussion; the final version is reproduced in the appendix. The following is a summary of the matters raised.

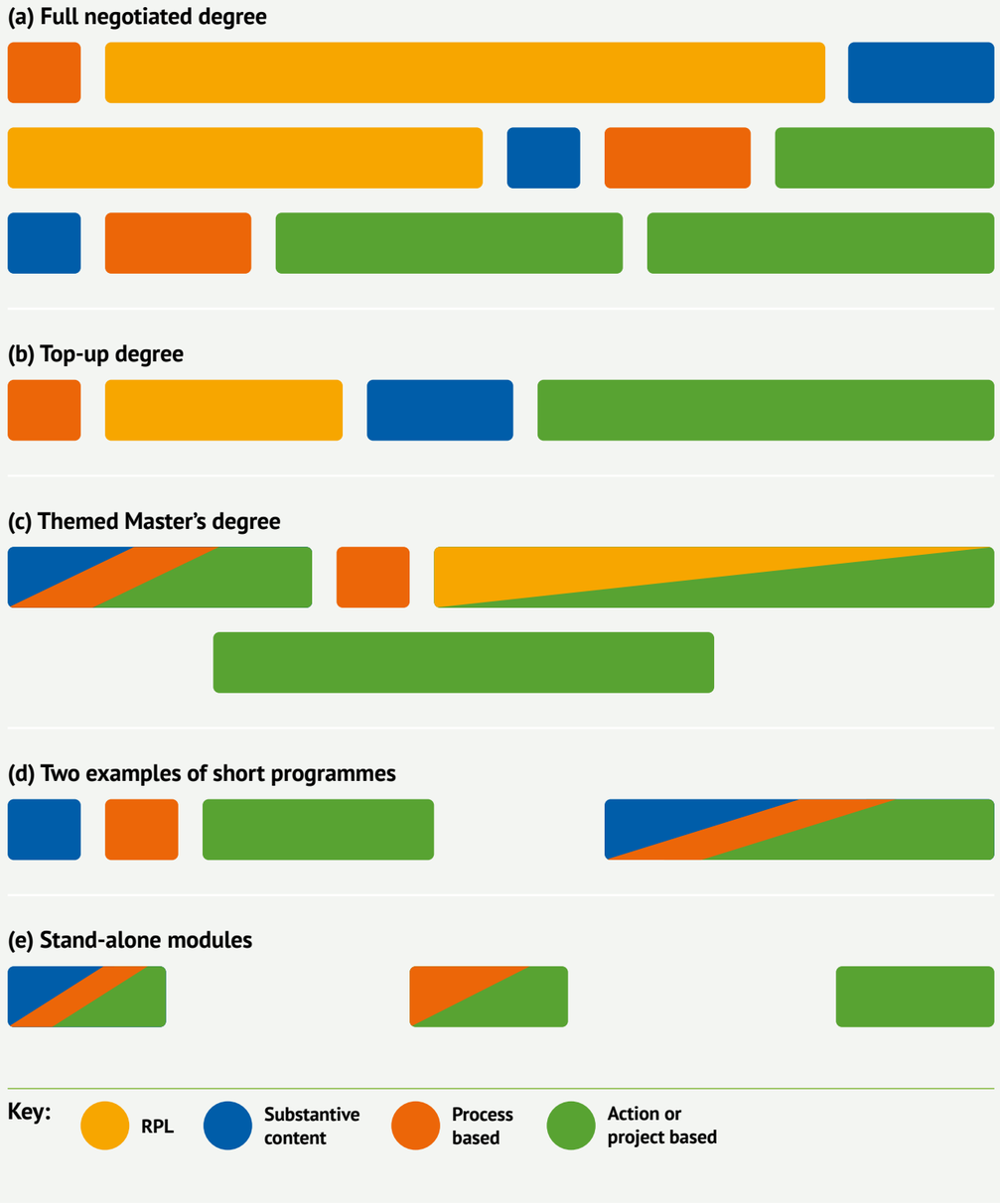


Potential demand and markets for WBL A high level of latent demand was identified for WBL and associated practices such as recognising previous learning. Employers, particularly SMEs, were described as very interested in this form of provision, although they may not have immediately associated it with higher education. SMEs and adult learners were quoted as often seeing apprenticeships and similar programmes as too structured and rule-bound, and one participant indicated that employers were happy to pay for bespoke practice-based provision provided that they were involved in decision-making and could see the benefits. In terms of sectors, the most widely-mentioned was business and management, partly as a response to the withdrawal of funding from management apprenticeships, but also due to an established tradition of using practice-based programmes for management and organisational development. Other fields where participants had experience of successful programmes included education (including higher education), health, engineering, and digital technology, with the latter being seen as having cross-sectoral relevance for instance in working with and managing AI and other new developments. Another potential market was seen as partnerships with professional bodies, for instance to offer individual work-based routes to qualified level or create opportunities for advanced development. Finally, while recent overreliance on the apprenticeship levy was recognised, a plea was made not to ignore other sources of funding that employers may be able to access, such as local business development funds.

Framing WBL There was some discussion of how WBL needs to be framed in order to appeal to employers and learners, and also to be credible within the institution. While ideas such as 'negotiated WBL', 'transdisciplinary learning' and WBL as a 'field of study' were seen as potentially important in an academic context, they were generally viewed as too esoteric to have meaning in the marketplace or even for that matter to academic staff who had not been inducted into WBL. 'Work-based learning' itself was viewed as vague and not necessarily identifiable with higher education. As a working title, there was some support for 'learning at work', hence its use in the final version of the discussion poster (Appendix); it was also emphasised that this needed to be linked to business, personal or professional development. On the other hand, some participants commented that it was more straightforward to market programmes with conventional titles such as 'project management', 'organisational development' or 'advanced practitioner programme', while taking a negotiated, action-based approach within them.

07.

FIGURE 2: Examples of WBL arrangements within institutions.



07.

Programme structure Several aspects of programme structure were discussed (see figure 2). The majority view of open, 'design-your-own-degree' frameworks was that they suited a relatively limited range of learners. One participant was however running programmes of this type quite successfully at levels 6 and 7, at least as a niche offering; each individual's programme was specified via a programme-level learning agreement, although this was described as simpler and more streamlined than the detailed, computer-mediated version that had formed part of the *Learning through Work* framework. On balance the view was that while an open framework could be used by staff to assemble programmes (including group programmes for single employers) quickly, where programmes themselves had some pre-structuring this made them easier to manage (and for learners and employers to understand and navigate). A typical full-programme structure might be for instance a potential RPL claim, some process-oriented modules (such as reflective practice, project management or research methods), possibly substantive modules, and project-type or action learning components. 'Shell' modules were seen as important for the latter; these could be written to look like standard substantive modules for validation purposes, but applied to individual contexts via a learning agreement or informal negotiation. An alternative for employer- or sector-specific programmes was to incorporate substantive content, process guidance and action-based learning into a single large component. Some comments were made about the size of modules, with action-based or project modules typically being between 20 and 60 credits; particularly at levels 6 and 7, larger project modules were favoured to be able to accommodate substantial work-based activities, and one participant commented on having a facility to include more than one 40- or 60-credit component in a 120- or 180-credit programme.

Short programmes and micro-credentials Particularly though not only in the context of SMEs, substantial interest was reported in short programmes and single, small modules that could form a 'micro-credential' in their own right. These programmes or modules were seen as useful for addressing specific issues for instance through an action learning or action research approach, supporting organisational development or change, upskilling to respond to new opportunities or ways of working, or simply providing ongoing professional development. They could also act as internal credentials but with value beyond the current employer, including to continue on to full university qualifications. It was however seen as important that the intrinsic value of these shorter offerings should not be undermined by emphasising progression opportunities.

Using digital technology The use of digital technology in WBL was only discussed in passing, but some relevant points were raised. Using digital interfaces to support learning was almost assumed, with one participant commenting that while their initial WBL provision had started with mainly local learners, it was now much more distributed with widespread use of digital resources and communication (cf. Lester and Crawford-Lee 2023). Potential was seen for using AI and chatbot applications to answer questions from staff, employers and learners, for instance on how modules, credit, RPL, learning outcomes and assessment criteria work; this was seen as freeing tutors from explaining routine matters, and improving consistency. UVAC support in this area was viewed as valuable, for instance in developing a curated-content generative AI tool comparable to the GenIE digital teaching and learning application that had recently been tested via the UVAC web portal. More sophisticated use of AI, such as for a 'virtual tutor' application, was viewed as potentially worthwhile (one participant was already using proprietary software to give basic feedback on project work), but the consensus was that a suitable (or customisable) application would soon be available, questioning the value of investing in a bespoke package.

07.

> **Where programmes themselves (have) some pre-structuring this (makes) them easier to manage and for learners and employers to understand and navigate.**

Institutional and staff capacity The discussions acknowledged that much WBL expertise had been diverted from negotiated and bespoke provision into apprenticeships, with comments that this had both diluted capacity that had been built up over the previous two or three decades, and brought in new ideas, approaches, members of staff and institutions. Some institutions were seen as having significant expertise in WBL, but this could need to be recovered and brought to the fore. Concerns were expressed about gaining support from institutions' central management for what could be seen as another 'new', unconventional and possibly resource-intensive approach, as well as from faculties and staff (cf. the discussion in section 4). Various staff development needs were discussed, including understanding and accepting the principles involved; taking on the WBL facilitator role; guidance on specific aspects, such as working with employers, learning agreements, module design and RPL; how WBL can work in specific sectors and contexts; and using digital technology effectively to support work-based learners. While some matters were seen as able to be driven from within, external support from UVAC was also seen as very welcome, in the same way that the organisation had built up expertise, influencing, training and resources to support the implementation of Degree Apprenticeships. External support was seen as particularly useful to support networking, including learning from existing sources of excellence; to provide influencing at institutional and policy level; to provide resources, including marketing resources, case-studies, videos and templates; and to provide resources for staff development if not necessarily to provide it directly.

08.

Commentary

During the period from 1990 to 2015 work-based learning evolved from being a means of giving workplace learning academic credibility and creditworthiness, to a well-theorised, thoroughly tested and practically effective field through which higher education institutions are able to engage with the work-space in a way that is both immediately relevant and intellectually robust. Principles such as the negotiated and situated nature of WBL; its pragmatist, constructionist and transdisciplinary underpinnings; the emergent nature of the focus of learning; and validation by reference to adequacy for action all became central to WBL conceptualisation and practice (e.g. Lester and Costley 2010, Gibbs 2015). Subsequently the dominance of apprenticeships over the last decade has created a diversionary discourse that has been dominated by external rules, protocols and funding. This is not in any sense to disparage apprenticeships in higher education, which have given rise to innovations of their own and have a vital role in providing work-based entry-routes to professional careers for entrants of all ages. Nevertheless it is important to recognise that apprenticeships conform to a different set of principles from negotiated WBL, and were designed for a different purpose. The recent refocussing of funding on apprenticeships for occupational entry may yet have benefits by encouraging the development of more appropriate programmes for among other things management, SMEs, advanced professional development and adult learners more generally.

The current climate can be described as conducive to revisiting WBL principles and regaining some of the capacity that has been dissipated over the past decade and more. However, this does not mean that future WBL developments should simply mirror those of 25 years ago. Key points for revitalising WBL in higher education include:

Fully individually-negotiated programmes have a place, but they are likely to be a niche market, with the main focus on postgraduate level and to a lesser extent level 6. Programmes of this type need to be straightforward to negotiate and navigate. Attention is likely to be needed to efficiency and funding aspects.

The biggest opportunities for developing open (i.e. not employer-specific) WBL are likely to involve themed programmes, particularly at levels 6 and 7. These may have a profession-specific, sectoral or more generic market while focussing on a broad application such as managing change, using new technology, business development or practice-based research, all in a way that is interpreted and negotiated into each participant's specific context.

Employer-specific WBL needs to look beyond traditional modular structures. This could involve programmes of various lengths that for instance integrate learning underpinning principles with changing work practices and developing new initiatives, or act as organisational interventions as well as action-based learning opportunities.

Approaches are needed that are immersed in work practice and enable learning to arise directly out of the work-space, while requiring a level of thinking appropriate to the relevant academic level. These will involve authentic means of assessment and require a wider repertoire of approaches than the traditional WBL project.

Digital technology has a substantial role to play in WBL, particularly in facilitating communication, access to and sharing of information, and providing guidance and feedback for learners. Its importance is likely to increase over time, but it needs to be used appropriately to support WBL principles rather than shaping learning around what is easy to implement digitally.

The positioning and promotion of WBL in the institution needs careful management, with thought for appropriate location and management structures; balancing between on the one hand fitting in with existing systems, structures and paradigms, and on the other maintaining WBL integrity and operational capacity; and considering how it can become a permanent part of the institution's provision.

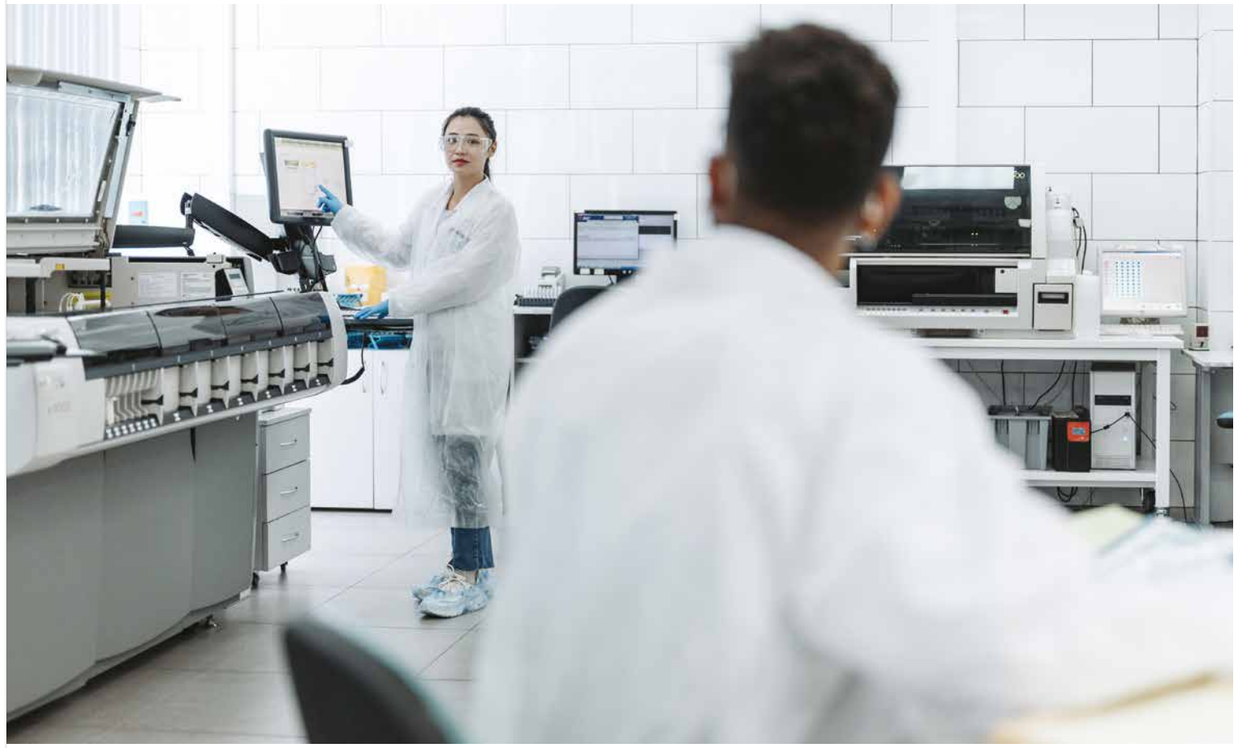
Quality assurance processes and measures need to be appropriate to the type of programme being offered, its purpose and the situation of the learners. For programmes designed for existing workers this means avoiding assumptions that are based on principles applying to apprenticeships or work placements.

For institutions, WBL can form a 'platform' and a parallel mission that complements more traditional academic teaching and research. WBL has a strong and well-established intellectual basis that needs to be emphasised both to move debates beyond vocationalism and 'employer training', and to safeguard against subverting academic standards to market demands.

08.

> **Work-based learning (has) evolved from being a means of giving workplace learning academic credibility and creditworthiness, to a well-theorised, thoroughly tested and practically effective field through which higher education institutions are able to engage with the work-space.**

Taking this forward suggests the use of shared principles that underpin a variety of practical approaches and programme types. While a common language of WBL is desirable, individual institutions need to be free to focus on approaches and applications that reflect their markets and missions, and complement other aspects of their offering. This is unlikely to be supported by attempting to create a centralised model along the lines of *Learning through Work* or a set of rules such as those used for apprenticeships. There is however a role for a centre of expertise in work-based learning, particularly if it has a distributed structure that brings in the expertise of institutions already operating in the field. A centre of this type, potentially organised by UVAC, could act as a repository for WBL knowledge and research, an active community of practice, and a source of information and guidance on good practice.



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Initials and acronyms

AI	Artificial intelligence
BTEC	Originally Business and Technology Education Council, now a brand of Pearson Education
CATS	Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme
GenIE	Generative AI in education, a tool developed by UVAC to support tutors and trainers to use digital technology in teaching and learning
HNC/D	Higher National Certificate/Diploma
LIW	Learning-integrated work
LtW	Learning through Work, a project and framework developed by the 'University for Industry' (see Ufi below)
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
NWBL	Negotiated work-based learning
QA	Quality assurance
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education
RPL	Recognition of prior/previous learning
RSA	Royal Society for the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce
SEEC	Originally South East England Consortium for Credit Accumulation and Transfer, now part of the Universities Association for Lifelong Learning (UALL)
SME	Small/medium enterprise
Ufi	The 'University for Industry', initially an initiative of the then Department for Education and Employment, later the Ufi Charitable Trust (branded for some purposes as Ufi-Learndirect)
UVAC	University Vocational Awards Council
WBL	Work-based learning
WIL	Work-integrated learning

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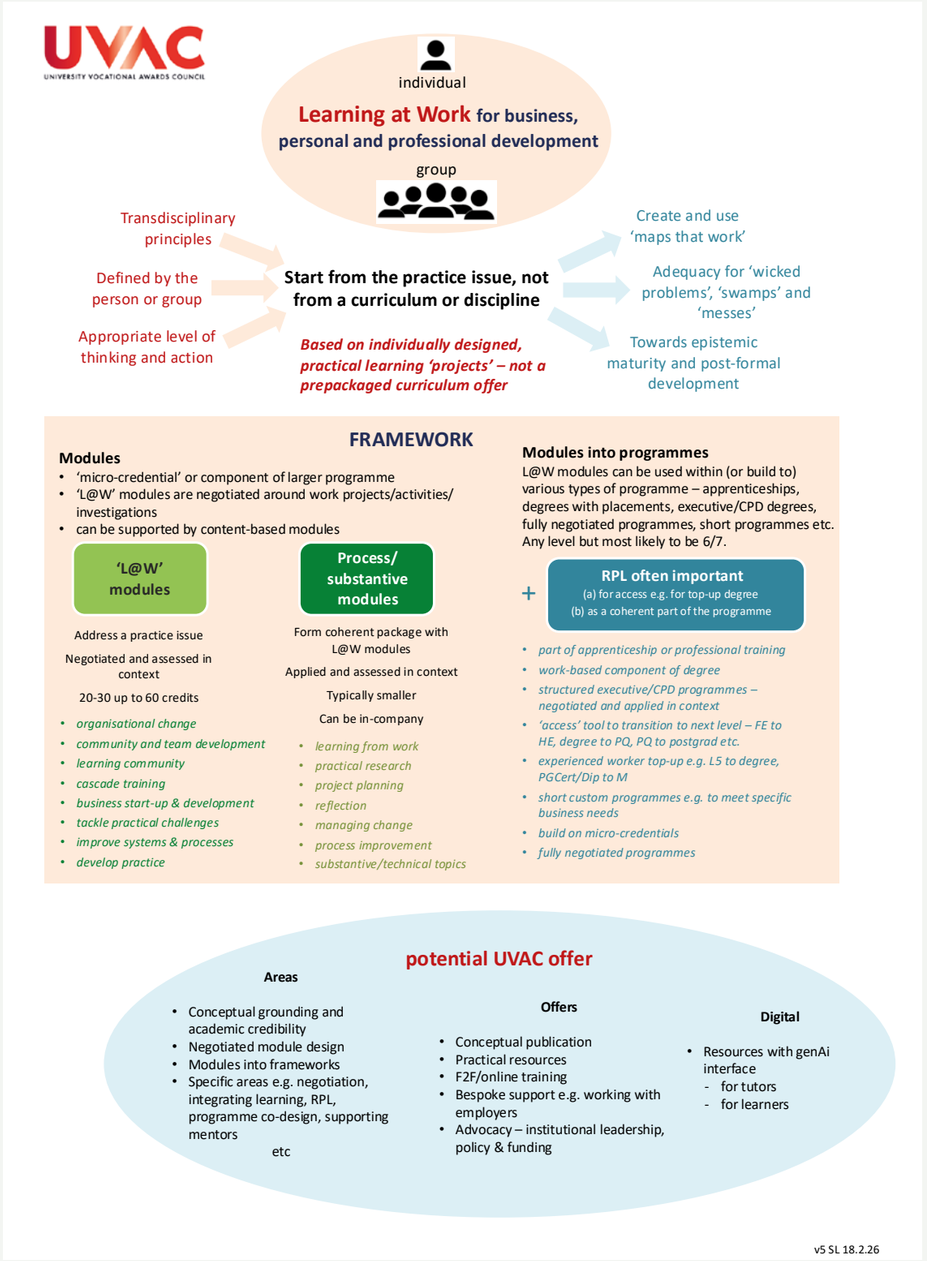
Appendix

The 'Learning at Work' concept and discussion poster



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About UVAC

The University Vocational Awards Council (UVAC) is one of the most authoritative voices on technical, vocational and professional education delivered by higher education and the leading expert on all aspects of the policy and operational requirements of higher and degree apprenticeships in England. UVAC is a membership body of around 80 UK universities and higher education providers and has been championing higher level technical and professional learning and progression routes into higher education and the professions for over 25 years. UVAC is known for its advocacy, representation and research, including work published in its official academic journal, Higher Education, Skills and Work-based Learning. In 2024, UVAC celebrated its silver jubilee.

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