



# WBL - a new learning paradigm: The learner, employer and facilitator experience

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# WBL A new Learning Paradigm: The learner, employer and facilitator experience

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## Executive Summary

This document reports on the findings of the Ako Aotearoa funded research project investigating the learner, employer/sponsor and facilitator experience of the degree programmes offered by Otago Polytechnic in the work-based learning (WBL) mode.

This research project follows an earlier research project, also funded by Ako Aotearoa, which investigated:

- the impact of WBL on learners, facilitators and employers
- the implications for Otago Polytechnic institutional policies and practices that emerged from a WBL pilot it undertook for the Bachelor of Applied Management

(See Ako Aotearoa report at <http://ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/research-register/list/workplace-based-learning-introducing-new-applied-degree-paradigm>)

The purpose of the research project reported on here, was to investigate and evaluate the learner, employer/sponsor and facilitator experience of their involvement in WBL degree programmes and to explore:

- What, if any, benefits and value the learner's WBL experience has added to the workplace?
- What benefits and value, if any, the learner feels they have gained in terms of career enhancement, greater levels of skills knowledge and employability and a stronger sense of professional identity?
- The implications for work-based learning processes, particularly focusing on learning agreement (contract) development and assessment?
- What has been the impact on Capable NZ facilitators as WBL has moved into a business as usual phase?

## General Findings

The findings from this research, in general, confirm those of the earlier but incomplete research of the first action research project of the WBL pilot, in that:

- WBL is a very effective form of higher education
  - learners enjoy the experience of the process
  - learners value the relevancy of the learning to their workplace challenges
  - learners also value the professional and personal growth that accrues to them
  - WBL facilitators need ongoing PD and academic support and effective leadership
  - WBL demands a subtly different and theoretically informed educational sensibility from that of traditional teaching practices
- WBL demands an ongoing research and evaluation effort to continuously improve practice and the quality of the learner's experience

The perspectives of those learners and facilitators eighteen months on from the research on the pilot has provided a clear picture of the value and possibilities of the WBL approach.

The small numbers of employers willing to participate in this research is something of a disappointment. Despite this, the responses reported by the employers / sponsors clearly indicate that there is much to be gained by having their employees undertake degree level WBL programmes.

The addition of the employer / sponsor perspectives add further weight to these possibilities and indicate a range of opportunities for meeting the human capital development needs of individual learners and their employing organisations.

## **WBL and consideration of implications for Māori learners, organisations and aspirations**

One of the original intentions of this research project was to explore our practice to date associated with enabling the WBL paradigm within the cultural context of Aotearoa. In particular we hoped to test our premise that there is a close correlation between Māori educational values and aspirations and the WBL process. There were two key issues we hoped to address:

- Māori perspectives in terms of data collection and
- Data analysis and dissemination – where “results” are different for Māori students, employers or staff.

As it transpired, the only occasion where Māori learners were involved, was with the Police Youth Aid project, which, as discussed in the report, is dealt with in another evaluation report outside this particular project. Consequently, this area of investigation was not dealt with in any practical sense.

This is an area that needs further investigation, promising, as it does, some real benefits for Māori learners.

## **Overall Recommendations**

An outcome of the earlier research project was the generation of a set of guiding principles for WBL practice and delivery. These have, to a large extent, been adopted and inform the day to day WBL practice for the undergraduate degree programmes offered by Otago Polytechnic in this mode. In addition, these guiding principles have significantly informed the development of the Masters of Professional Practice which employs a WBL inquiry methodology.

While further development of these guiding principles is not an outcome of this research, this report offers a set of recommendations as a means of improving the overall quality of the programme and the experience of learners, employer / sponsors and facilitators.

This section is presented in three parts: 1. learner, 2. employer and 3. facilitator

### **Part One: Learner perspectives of the pilot and ongoing WBL programmes**

The high levels of satisfaction with the experience of and achievements in undertaking the WBL programme as reported by learners are testament to the efficacy and soundness of the WBL mode of higher education. It is also validation of the skills and knowledge of the facilitators and academic mentors who supported them. It is important to note that all who undertook the pilot and post-pilot WBL programme graduated with a bachelor's degree, almost all with exceptional results.

There are of course opportunities for improvements in delivery of the WBL programme that can further enhance the learners' experience and their learning outcomes. There are several areas that can benefit from close attention:

### ***Recommendation 1:***

Offer all WBL candidates the opportunity to attend a face to face group workshop in order to become appropriately inducted into the programme and oriented to the expectations, processes and specific nature of the WBL process.

### ***Recommendation 2:***

Develop a structured and pro-active process to facilitate an efficient and time delineated engagement with the learning agreement process. Strategies like setting timeframes and milestones for learners and closely monitoring progress at the early stages to get forward momentum can help learners bring their ideas into focus more quickly.

Greater formal or direct instruction in the development process of the learning agreement would also help, particularly in the process of identifying and articulating learning outcomes and the means by which they can be met. This is something that most, if not all learners, struggled with and to a large extent it was the very unfamiliarity of the language and concept of learning outcomes that was the main barrier.

Consideration should be given to the development of an introductory module on writing up the learning agreement process, delivered either as face-to-face workshops or as a facilitated online module.

### ***Recommendation 3:***

Assist learners to form informal study groups; in person where geographically co-located and virtually where geographically distributed.

### ***Recommendation 4:***

Provide learners with access to a moderated social media platform to fill their peer support need. Overseas experience shows that there is often a strong sense of collegiality generated in this way and that people chose to maintain connections with the group even after they are no longer involved in the programme of study. This may also address the informal study group needs of those learners who are so inclined.

## **Part Two: Employer perspectives of the WBL programme**

The employers interviewed were highly positive about their perceptions of the benefits the WBL programme accrued to their organisation and to their employee's PD. However, employers had a limited understanding of the WBL model, how it operated, their role and responsibilities for their employee learner, and what input they could have into the design or requirements of the WBL projects.

This suggests that Capable NZ's employer engagement process and practice is underdeveloped, which is probably a consequence of being at such an early stage in the evolution of Otago Polytechnic's WBL model. The fact that there were a very small number of employers / sponsors willing to be interviewed has not helped in developing a more in-depth understanding of the employer's perspective and appreciation of the potential value this model of PD might have.

Unfortunately, several learners had the experience of their employment circumstances changing significantly, either through restructuring or other circumstances. While this was accommodated for the learner through a re-negotiation of the learning agreement and its

learning outcomes, it did result in the employer, in effect, removing themselves from the partnership arrangement.

These changes in employment circumstances may also have been a consequence of the lack of formal engagement with the employer at the beginning of the programme, or at least at the learning agreement negotiation stage. Had this been properly attended to, there may still have been a need to re-negotiate the learning agreements, but there might have been the possibility that the employer, through persuasive discussion, could have been retained in the partnership to provide their perspective and strategic need.

More recently there have been efforts to engage more intensively with one or two employers and at the earliest stage possible. However this protocol has not yet been fully adopted and more emphasis and effort needs to be focused in this area. If the WBL model that Otago Polytechnic has adopted is to fulfil its vision of innovative, effective and fit for purpose employer engagement, then it is imperative that this aspect of the WBL model be properly attended to.

Apart from the ability to leverage the cost, productivity and innovation benefits that may accrue to an employer through WBL, it is also in the learner's interest to have their employer / sponsor properly engaged in the WBL programme. This ensures that the employer is fully cognisant of:

- their role and responsibilities in the WBL programme
- the academic processes and requirements of the WBL programme
- aims, objectives and learning outcomes from the WBL projects
- time-frames, resources and budgetary implications of the WBL projects

This provides the possibility that the full potential of the higher education experience can be realised by the learner.

***Recommendation 5:***

Emphasise the need for employer engagement on the part of Capable NZ and more effort focused on giving full expression to the participatory relationship as part of the WBL partnership. To appropriately implement this recommendation protocols and policies need to be developed and facilitators need to be appropriately trained.

***Recommendation 6:***

Seriously consider appointing a suitably qualified and experienced person who can engage with employers so that they properly understand the potential of WBL for their organisation as a full partner in the process. Employers need appropriate facilitation to understand and appreciate the requirements and demands of the academic framework of the WBL model. However, to achieve the appropriate level of employer understanding and to facilitate maximum buy in of their engagement, it is important that the conversation is conducted in the language and context of business and industry rather than that of academia.

### **Part Three: Capable NZ's facilitator perspectives on the WBL programme**

Several issues emerged from interviews with facilitators:

- Limited induction and preparation of new WBL facilitators
- Lack of on-going facilitator professional development
- Capable NZ's employment structure presents barriers to informal workplace learning
- Lack of support for appropriate employer engagement
- Lack of academic leadership.

#### **Limited induction of new WBL facilitators**

Some facilitators reported a perceived lack of adequate preparation for the WBL role, especially by those engaged post-pilot. This has led to feelings of confusion and low levels of confidence for some in dealing with the nuances and complexities of a highly individualised and flexible education process, in which there is little direct similarity or alignment between learner contexts, projects or workplace demands and issues.

#### ***Recommendation 7:***

Establish a formal and properly focused and resourced process of induction and preparation of new WBL facilitators. Include provision for a buddy system where experienced facilitators can mentor and coach those new to the WBL model of higher education.

#### **Lack of on-going facilitator professional development**

WBL is a relatively new field, certainly in New Zealand, and consequently there is little formal research or a well-developed knowledge base about the practice of WBL at degree level and above. There is however substantial theory, case study research and PD knowledge internationally, particularly from the UK and more specifically from Middlesex University's Centre for WBL, with whom Otago Polytechnic has a formal MOU. Middlesex University has three decades of WBL experience up to and including doctoral and post-doctoral level.

This does require appropriate academic leadership to guide this engagement and an appropriate level of resourcing to sustain and grow the local skills and knowledge. It also suggests that a broad range of research needs to be fostered and encouraged to grow the local knowledge base.

#### ***Recommendation 8:***

Provide regular, academically appropriate and practice focused WBL PD activities for facilitators, academic mentors and assessors. This is in order for practitioners to engage with the WBL knowledge base and to share insights, case-study experience, learner support strategies and new learning about WBL practice. In support of this PD, it is also recommended that research into the NZ context of WBL be actively encouraged, resourced and fostered.

Additionally, study leave and travel scholarships to visit centres of WBL excellence would also be of great benefit to Otago Polytechnic's development of their WBL model and its credibility as an internationally supported initiative.



## **Capable NZ Employment Structures**

Capable NZ's employment structure presents barriers to informal workplace learning. Interview respondents commented on the fact that the current employment structures of Capable NZ, with its predominance of part-time and contract staff, preclude, or at least represent a barrier to, valuable informal workplace learning and peer to peer interaction and support. This, it seems, is because it is difficult to access informal as well as formal peer to peer support when people operate on very differing timetables and availability for scheduled meetings.

Given the current employment structure of WBL facilitators, there is no simple answer to this conundrum. If all facilitators were employed in a less fragmented fashion, then the value of the informal learning potential could be more easily leveraged as well as make organising regular facilitator PD a much simpler logistical proposition. While this is probably impractical at this still relatively early stage of development, it is important to recognise the impediment to efficient and substantive development that this situation represents.

### ***Recommendation 9:***

Seriously consider reviewing the employment structure and conditions of Capable NZ's facilitators with a view to enabling regular PD activity and facilitating peer sharing, informal learning and targeted coaching and mentoring opportunities.

## **Lack of support for appropriate employer engagement**

A number of facilitators reported feeling inadequately prepared and equipped for their role in employer engagement. While the focus on the learner and their outcomes is to be lauded, it is nonetheless imperative that the employer and their understanding of their role and responsibilities receive their appropriate share of the focus.

Facilitators reported a perceived lack of support for and focus on appropriate employer engagement. This is yet another area of PD that has, until now, been largely ignored. While it's not possible to categorically state that the lack of employer engagement resulted in a number of learners parting company with their employer or line manager, the fact that there was limited or no formally recognised employer relationship removed any possibility that the learner's position could be supported through effective advocacy by their facilitator.

### ***Recommendation 10:***

Establish protocols and policies to formally and actively include employer engagement in WBL programmes as a fundamental condition and that this is also made a focus of facilitator PD.

## **A gap in academic leadership**

Several respondents commented on a perceived lack of academic leadership for WBL. In part this has resulted from personnel changes, whereby the person with the deepest understanding and the most experience and knowledge about WBL has been deployed to other projects. Capable NZ facilitators now have only limited access to this person for guidance and informed feedback about learner support, learning agreement development and facilitation issues. To date this academic leadership gap has not been effectively bridged.

***Recommendation 11:***

Recognise and address the important issue of continuity of and ready access to appropriate academic leadership for WBL. This current gap in academic leadership for WBL is perceived as being at the root of concerns about facilitator support, guidance, PD etc. If not dealt with properly, there is a strong possibility or even likelihood that further development of the WBL programme and its continuing evolution will stall and eventually become moribund.

## Introduction

This report outlines the activities of the Ako Aotearoa funded action research project investigating the learner, employer/sponsor and facilitator experience of the WBL degree programme.

The purpose of this research project was to investigate and evaluate the employer/sponsor and learner experience of their Work-Based Learning involvement in degree programmes and to explore:

- what, if any, benefits and value the learner's WBL experience has added to the workplace
- what benefits and value, if any, the learner feels they have gained in terms of career enhancement, greater levels of skills knowledge and employability and a stronger sense of professional identity
- the implications for work-based learning processes, particularly focusing on learning agreement development and assessment.

This research project is a follow up to an earlier funded research project investigating impact on workplace-based learners, facilitators, employers and institutional practices of a pilot for a workplace-based degree pathway. While the earlier project was successful in investigating and evaluating the institutional learnings from the pilot project, which also resulted in the development of underpinning guidelines and principles for establishing WBL within the New Zealand tertiary education context (see Ako report at <http://ako.aotearoa.ac.nz/research-register/list/workplace-based-learning-introducing-new-applied-degree-paradigm>), it was unable to adequately evaluate the learner and employer/sponsor experience due to the timing constraints of the original funding requirements.

## Project Aims and Objectives

Underpinning the evolving model of WBL is the key dimension of partnership between the learner, Otago Polytechnic and the employer / sponsor. To better understand and to give full expression to this dimension of partnership it is critical that this follow up research properly investigates and evaluates the experience and perceptions of each of the partners in this WBL relationship, that is the learner, the employer/sponsor and the Otago Polytechnic academic staff involved.

This research project sought to evaluate the impact of degree level WBL in the New Zealand context and whether or not there is real benefit and value from WBL focused inquiry projects for both learner and the employer.

Researchers such as Bridger and Moore (2009) argue that because of the relatively recent development of degree and post graduate level learning and qualifications in the workplace, there is still some scepticism as to the sustainability of the WBL model. Accordingly there is a pressing need to understand how the intersection of workplace and higher education may provide the necessary affordances to achieve the goals of increased productivity, career development and promotion and the acceleration of innovation, effective management of transformational change and competitive advantage based on the development of intellectual capital.

This research sought to answer the following questions:

- What is the learner/graduate perception of the meaning and benefits of WBL?
- What is the employer perception of value and benefit of WBL to the workplace?
- Did employers and learners experience key benefits? What aspects were problematic to either or both?
- What are the implications for the institution in what is found out about the impact in the workplace?
- What indications are there for further research and future improvements in the WBL experience?

## The Work-based Learning Model

The WBL model adopted by Otago Polytechnic has been refined following the experience of and the learnings from the WBL pilot conducted in 2011/2012. It uses a three step approach:

- Step 1)** An assessment of prior learning (APL) phase in which a learner's experience, formal and informal learning and training is assessed and credit towards the terminal qualification determined. An outline for the work to be undertaken in steps 2 and 3 is presented and feedback is given as to its scope, scale and academic appropriateness.
- Step 2)** The negotiation of a tri-partite learning agreement (learner, employer and academic institution) that outlines the manner in which the balance of learning to fulfill the degree requirements is undertaken. This learning agreement articulates the learning outcomes to be achieved, the milestones and timeframes to be met and method by which the outputs will be assessed. The programme of study may be made up of a major project, a reiterative series of smaller projects or a combination of taught courses and project work. The learning agreement is given final approval by an academic panel to ensure rigour and compliance with the regulations of the qualification sought and the likelihood of it satisfying the learning outcomes as articulated in the qualification's graduate profile.
- Step 3)** The implementation of the programme of learning, usually done through workplace projects designed to fulfill the learning outcomes and assessment requirements negotiated in the learning agreement process. The implementation phase terminates in a final assessment to a panel of academics and practitioner experts.

## What the literature says

*"..work-based learning provides an important research site for examining the contemporary intersections between the institution of work and the institution of learning and the alignments and contestations around the design, delivery and assessment of work based learning."* Harman (2010)

## The post-industrial workplace

A view shared by many suggests that the "*post-fordist economic paradigm privileges knowledge (rather than industry) as its economic base.*" (Bellamy, 2009:86). This has become known as the *Knowledge Economy* or *Knowledge Society* a "...term [that] refers to

*those industries and occupations that are primarily based on highly skilled employment and sophisticated production.*" (MBIE - Labour website, 2009).

The seismic shifts in global economic power and activity driven by the confluence of advances in technology, off-shoring of industrial production to cheaper labour markets, global financial and trading interdependencies and access to real time information and data generated about everything imaginable and made instantly available on the Internet is the *"biggest wave of change since the industrial revolution"* (Roos et al, 1997). It has also brought about a need to shift New Zealand, among others, away from a *"low pay, low skills labour market"* (MBIE - Labour website, 2009). Others, including Stewart (1997), Edvinsson and Malone (1997) and Teece (2000) argue that wealth creation of companies no longer resides in land, labour and capital but in intellectual capital and that the creation and management of intellectual capital provides the only sustainable basis of competitive advantage.

Competition from a globalised marketplace of ideas, new products, better resourced and more agile competitors along with a shrinking source of materials, finance and customers due to the ongoing financial crisis has created a challenging and sometimes terminal climate in which to do business. In this environment, knowledge and the ability to generate and manage new knowledge, whether it's about new products or new and better ways of doing things becomes an essential tool in today's workplace, not just for competitive advantage, but in many cases, simply to survive (Teece, 2000).

The business of harnessing intellectual capital and putting it to use, known as structural capital, require organisations to have structures and systems that, *"... facilitate knowledge development and transfer at the level of the individual and the group."* (Garnett 2009:228). The economic importance attached to a company's ability to exploit knowledge and the learning that underpins it, cannot be underestimated. A company's industrial and commercial know-how is the lifeblood of its knowledge assets and fuels its ability to compete in the marketplace and thrive (Teece, 2000).

Organisations that are succeeding in the current environment are those that are able to effectively generate new knowledge about how to improve what they do more efficiently and innovatively than their competitors, or are able to fundamentally alter what they do in response to what the market is indicating and/or strategic imperatives demand. (Garnett, Op Cite). According to Faucheux, (n.d.:3) *"in today's innovation driven global economy, learning and the command of intellectual and knowledge capital have become key success factors of international competitiveness."*

Bean and Radford (2002:ix) argue that while *"The capacity to innovate is the source of a company's enduring strength. [and]...source of value."*, actually being able to effectively leverage the intellectual capital of employees through training and development so that they can contribute to mission critical innovation is easier said than done. As Rose (2000:3) observes:

*"A generation ago, organizations hired people who already knew (or who could quickly learn) what they needed to know to do a good job. What these employees brought to the company had a much longer shelf life. Therefore, learning in its broader sense - trying new things, constantly experimenting, and making errors - tended not to be encouraged."*

Much has changed in a generation, but the central issue for business in the present environment is how to “...do a much better job of engaging the collective minds of their organisation.” Rose (2000:3). A key component in the drive to more effectively leverage the intellectual capacity of employees and extract the value therein is through the development of a culture that encourages and rewards workplace learning. Workplace learning has been described as that which, “...should provide the skills leading to the capacity to innovate. Innovation has become a key concept in the ability of firms to be competitive.” (ANTA, 2003:2).

While ‘on-job’ experience and training can contribute significantly to an organisation’s competitiveness and profitability, the critical strategic and innovative capability of the organisation has to be leveraged and engaged with at a higher level of learning than is normally associated with traditional forms of workplace learning. WBL at degree level and above provides the opportunity to add significant value in terms of strategy, innovation, operational and process improvements, efficiency gains, to name but a few.

### **Work-based learning in the New Zealand context**

According to a recently published Industry Training Federation (ITF) report, workplace-based learning is ‘*comparatively under-researched*’ and the status of workplace learning is ‘*under-recognised*’ Vaughn, O’Neil and Cameron (2011).

WBL in New Zealand as a formally recognised strand of vocational education has, in recent years, primarily taken the form of education/training organised around Industry Training Organisation (ITO) standards based qualification structures and largely intended as ‘on-job’ training. Established under the Industry Training Act 1992, this system of industry training largely replaced the older forms of workplace-based training such as apprenticeships and ‘in-house’ training and career progression regimes that were common, particularly in government departments and ministries pre the 1992 Act.

ITOs are the standard setting bodies for industry sector groups and are largely responsible for developing training standards which inform the industry specific qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework. In this arena of WBL, qualifications are largely based on unit standards which are at national certificate and national diploma level. On the New Zealand Qualifications Authority framework (NZQA), a few are set at level 5 and occasionally these can be at level 6. A recent innovation has been the approval given to establish an under-graduate degree in Youth Development based on unit standards at levels 5, 6 and 7.

In unit standards based education and training, the curriculum is centrally controlled and closely prescribed as is the content structure, performance criteria, the form of the evidence required and the method of assessment for the qualification. This is also true of other forms of vocationally focused qualifications such as the New Zealand Diploma in Business and MBA programmes that purport to be positioned as work focused education.

### **WBL and consideration of implications for Māori learners, organisations and aspirations**

A unique feature of WBL is that the context for the learning is in the workplace which is also the site for both the focus of study and the curriculum. In addition the nature and manner of the learning to be undertaken is a negotiated process between learner, their employer and

the institution, in this case Otago Polytechnic. Another feature of WBL is its structural flexibility which allows and enables a wide variety of places of employment, which may be either paid or unpaid and voluntary. It also enables and allows different approaches to learning including group processes and group projects.

These features of WBL make it particularly suitable for adapting to and accommodating ‘...a Māori worldview, with its associated knowledge bases, values, beliefs and preferred pedagogical practices.’ (MacFarlane et al, 2008, pg. 5), and provide ample opportunity to observe and support “.. the tapu of knowledge, or the tapu of learning and the tikanga associated with it.”(Mead, 2003, pg320).

Otago Polytechnic’s Kaitohutohu, Dr Khyla Russell was consulted and both the MOU between the four Papatipu Runaka and Otago Polytechnic and the Te Kura Matatini ki Otago Māori Strategic Framework (2007-2011), were considered in relation to this proposed research project.

One of the original intentions of this research project was to explore our practice to date associated with enabling the WBL paradigm within the cultural context of Aotearoa. In particular we hoped to test our premise that there is a close correlation between Māori educational values and aspirations and the WBL process. There were two key issues we hoped to address:

- Māori perspectives in terms of data collection and analysis (e.g. student reflection) will not unwittingly be overlooked and cultural perspectives will be taken into account
- Data analysis and dissemination – where “ results” are different for Māori students, employers or staff (positive or negative), we will consult with Māori to ensure we are not the only judges of the interpretation but are including other perspectives

As it transpired, the only occasion where Māori learners were involved, was with the Police Youth Aid project, which, as discussed later in this report, (see page 22), was dealt with in another evaluation report outside this particular project. Consequently, this area of investigation was not dealt with in any practical sense.

However, it is important that this aspect of WBL practice be investigated, promising as it does potential benefit to Māori learners.

### **Work-based learning as a new higher education paradigm**

Herein lies the primary difference between what is presently considered WBL and the form, structure, educational philosophy and pedagogy (or heutagogy) of the WBL model that Otago Polytechnic offers. There is no precedent in New Zealand for WBL at degree or post graduate level in which the curriculum is determined by the learner and the learner’s workplace context. In the Otago Polytechnic model of WBL, the curriculum, learning outcomes and method of assessment is negotiated with the learner, the learner’s employer and the academic institution by way of a learning agreement and operates within the framework of the graduate profile of the qualification.

It is this paradigm of higher education that sets it apart from other models of work-based learning. A model in which the learning is situated entirely in the workplace; where the locus of power is shifted away from the academy’s traditional mode of teaching and more towards the learner and the learner’s context; and where responsibility for academic validity is held by the institution without it determining the specifics of what will be learned, when it will be

learned, or in what order. There is little if any precedent for work-based learning at degree, graduate diploma or post graduate level, nor one that deliberately attempts to have the learner's context as the driver of the learning process, and in which the role of the institution is to support that journey rather than control the nature and content of it.

### **The philosophical underpinning of WBL at Otago Polytechnic**

There are many views on the nature of WBL and what it means. The Higher Education Academy's 2006 report entitled "Work-Based Learning: Illustrating the higher education landscape" makes the following observation:

*"Everyone has a view on what work-based learning means and they use a wide range of terms interchangeably (e.g. workplace learning, work-related learning, vocational learning). This all goes to confuse the situation and undervalue the potential benefits of work-based learning as a mode of learning at a higher level"* (Nixon, Smith, Stafford and Camm, 2006:3)

Otago Polytechnic, following the delivery of the WBL pilot in 2011/2012, has developed the following definition as its philosophical approach in developing a working model for the practice of WBL:

*The primary focus of WBL is the learning that emanates from the challenges of the workplace. An individual negotiated learning agreement defines the learning and the nature of the knowledge and skills to be achieved and how these will be sought. It describes how these may contribute to the workplace as well as how the inquiry meets the institution's academic requirements for the award of a qualification as set out in the WBL Framework.*

*WBL is inquiry driven and is planned and managed by the learner, in partnership with the institution and the workplace. The curriculum of study is derived from the workplace and its particular context, for the dual purposes of:*

- a) adding value to the organisation by effecting change, improving workplace practice and performance*
- b) enhancing the PD and identity of the learner as an effective practitioner.*

This definition is operationalised by attending to the following:

- that it is education conducted in, by and for the workplace
- that the learner, through negotiation with employer and polytechnic, determines the nature of the curriculum
- that the curriculum is situated in the learner's workplace context
- that the learner determines the order and pacing of the learning
- that the method of assessment is negotiated
- that it is a learning process agreed between the learner, his or her employer and Otago Polytechnic
- that there is a perceived and tangible benefit to the employer
- that Otago Polytechnic safeguards the academic integrity of the learning
- that the learning must demonstrate evidence of and be aligned to the graduate attributes as articulated in the qualification's graduate profile



## **Work-based Learning: A three-way partnership**

WBL is based on a tripartite contract between the learner the employer and the institution (Smith and Betts, 2000). This requires a deep and strong engagement or relationship to be built between the institution and the employing organisation (Workman, nd) and is necessary to ensure adequate and appropriate understanding by all parties of the type and extent of support required by the WBL learner to achieve their learning goals.

This means that employers need to be informed about the academic requirements, practices and language as it relates to WBL. In turn the academic advisor needs to be familiar with the language, practices and constraints of the workplace (Harvey, 2007). In both cases these considerations must be incorporated into the engagement process. On both sides understanding is required to:

- meet the employer's expectation of a direct benefit from the WBL learning process
- meet the institution's expectation that the workplace environment will be sufficiently "learning friendly" and supportive to enable the learner to meet the desired learning outcomes.

Otago Polytechnic's WBL initiative is largely based on the experience of a number of United Kingdom (UK) universities and on extensive international literature. WBL has been a feature of UK's Higher Education (HE) landscape for nearly twenty years and the most commonly recognised model of WBL is based on high level agreements between an institution and corporate companies with large workforces.

The New Zealand context throws up a number of conditions that require an adaptation of the model. For instance, WBL agreements usually involve the commitment by employers with large workforces supporting and fully or partially funding, multiple cohorts of learners. The reality is that the UK has many companies with large workforces while New Zealand has very few and by far the largest numbers of workers are employed by small to medium enterprises (SMEs). Even in this realm, SMEs in New Zealand are those that employ fewer than 20 workers (MED, 2011), while the equivalent in the UK employ is between 50-250 depending on size.

One of the important signals that have been received from employer groups<sup>1</sup> here is that the WBL model must be focused on small to medium sized businesses. SMEs employ the vast majority of the nation's workers and historically have been generally unsuccessful in leveraging the skill development opportunities and/or tapping the intellectual / knowledge resources of our tertiary vocational education system.

The issues that are emerging along this front are to do with how a model of WBL can address the wide variety of skill development needs of SMEs that occupy widely differing market and occupational spaces. In many instances, SME have few workers; have limited resources for up-skilling and training, especially when these opportunities are delivered in off site or off job situations.

Added to this is the fact that New Zealand has a relatively high proportion of entrepreneur types who are self-employed and therefore have no formal employer. In these cases it is necessary to adjust pre-determined concepts of how WBL should operate and develop ways of dealing with these types of variations of context and circumstance. This is necessary in

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<sup>1</sup> Keynote address by Carrie Murdoch, Manager Education, Training & Trade Business NZ at the Work-based learning Forum, Wellington, October 2011

order to meet the widely differing candidate contexts and aspirations, while maintaining the academic integrity and validity of the WBL model we are evolving.

In these cases Otago Polytechnic's practice has been to use expert mentor/coaches to support learners, especially where, as a self-employed candidate, there is no actual employer to act as the third party to the learning agreement. In this context, the expert mentor/coach has a proxy workplace supervision role to provide the business specific guidance and direction that might otherwise be taken on by a workplace line manager.

## **Background**

The Otago Polytechnic WBL pilot ran from November 2010 to July 2012 and involved a total of 13 learners. The action research project that ran alongside the pilot ran from January 2011 to February 2012, with the final report, following peer review, being delivered in early March of the same year. Due to the terms of the funding, it was not possible to cover the entire length of the pilot. Consequently the focus of the research objectives shifted to concentrate on the learnings garnered from the institutional perspectives of the pilot's operation and the formulation of a set of guidelines, principles and recommendations for future developments and improvements in ongoing WBL practice.

The original research project was regarded as being successful in articulating the institutional issues and providing clear direction in WBL development as a strategically important initiative for Otago Polytechnic's educational future. However, it did fail to meet a primary objective of properly investigating and evaluating the entirety of the learners' experience of the pilot and that of the employer / sponsor. This failure was due in the main, to a mismatch between the pilot's duration and the funding timelines. This meant that by the time the pilot had been completed, learners were not far enough advanced in their WBL projects to gain anything sufficiently substantive or meaningful from their experience. This also meant that their employing organisation could not effectively form a view of the benefit or otherwise of the WBL programme.

### **The impact of work-based learning**

An impact study conducted by the Higher Education Academy in 2008 provided the following reasons why UK employers supported their employees in undertaking a WBL programme of study at a higher education level:

- to develop the knowledge, skills and expertise of staff to improve the quality of organisational management and maximise the benefit to the business
- to support staff retention strategies by demonstrating a commitment to ongoing staff training and development
- to supplement and extend the nature of the in-house staff training and development
- fitted well into the work schedule
- required employees to be away from their place of work for a minimal amount of time.

The academy also identified tangible benefits of supporting a WBL process in their organisation. These include:

- provided an opportunity to influence change in the workplace
- linked theory to practical day-to-day issues faced by the business

- established a clearer direction of travel for the organisation
- development of new or improved existing policies, standards and contracts
- improved service provision to the end users and improved quality of work increased levels of innovation
- improved performance of employees who are more self-sufficient and require less direct support
- secured a positive attitudinal and behavioural change in staff in line with the values of the organisation
- achieved external recognition and prestige.

This study also looked at the impact WBL has on employees as learners and the benefits that they thought they gained including:

- validating and formalising their experience
- opening up new opportunities for career progression
- develop practical skills to enable them to do a current role better or develop a new role
- opportunity to influence and improve organisational policy and practice to support organisational objectives
- flexibility/convenience of the WBL model's delivery in the workplace, meeting individual learning needs and styles and being more directly relevant to the employee's work
- the ability to study at their own pace, balancing family and work commitments.

Other benefits reported included:

- increased confidence
- better performance at work
- taking on more responsibility
- changed jobs or secured promotion
- better able to see other points of view
- positive change in ways of thinking at work
- being able to coach others at work through change
- professional recognition and membership
- higher aspirations and motivation
- raised personal status
- more self-aware as an individual
- learning to think and challenge assumptions
- a greater awareness and understanding of particular issues
- developed new and enhanced existing skills
- more likely to take stock and reflect on their performance.

### **Expected contribution to existing knowledge**

As highlighted in the literature review, WBL has been widely researched in the UK where it has been a feature of HE for the past three decades. However, as WBL in New Zealand is at a very early stage in its development, there is very little research of its application in the NZ context. It is anticipated that this research will add to what is a growing body of knowledge and literature, as WBL gains traction and acceptance within this country's tertiary education landscape.

## **Structure of findings**

The findings are organised into three sections:

1. The learner experience and perspectives
2. The employer perspective
3. The facilitator experience and perspective

### **Note:**

In the original research project brief, it was intended to include data from the Police Youth Aid Officer (YAO), programme which launched in late 2011. This programme delivered four Level 7 Otago Polytechnic Bachelor of Social Services papers in a modified WBL programme for youth aid officers (YAO) as part of their training. The programme was designed in collaboration with senior Royal New Zealand Police College training and development staff.

The proposed investigation of the Police YAO experience as part of this WBL investigation was thought to have a pertinent and useful purpose at the time of writing the research proposal. While important, the police YAO aspect of the WBL investigation was always something of an adjunct to the main line of inquiry, given that it operates in a quite a different context and manner from the other WBL activity.

Recently it was determined that Capable NZ should carry out a separate, stand-alone and comprehensive mixed methods evaluation impact survey that has a broader and more specific focus than was originally envisaged for this report's research. This evaluation survey has been commissioned by the Royal New Zealand Police College and it is thought that to all intents and purposes, it supersedes the original intent for this research and has in fact made it redundant. Consequently it is deemed appropriate that the police YAO perspectives not be included in this report, but are left to be reported on from the purpose designed evaluation impact survey.

## **Inquiry design and methodology**

This research project is using a case study approach to investigate the impact of the WBL experience in the NZ context on learners, employers and academic facilitators. It looks at four groups:

### **Group 1:**

- 8 WBL learners involved in the original pilot
- 2 employers or employer proxies involved in the original pilot.

This group would not have benefited from the changes made as a result of the review from the previous research so it's important to evaluate what their experience was.

### **Group 2:**

- 4 WBL learners enrolled post-pilot
- 2 employers or employer proxies involved post-pilot.

This second group came on board after many changes were made so it is important to see what impact the changes had on their experience.

### **Group 3:**

- 5 Capable NZ facilitators, involved in either the pilot or post-pilot, or both.

## Methodology

Individuals were interviewed primarily by phone and their responses recorded and then transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for data that reveals unanticipated responses or insights.

The interview data has been organised into themes and used to extract issues, concerns and areas for improvement, modification and/or revision in the WBL approach used to date. This will form the basis of recommendation for continued improvements in delivery, policies and protocols.

## Research participation

This research has involved twelve learners in the WBL degree programme, eight of whom were in the original pilot and four enrolled post-pilot. Of these, four are from educational institutions, two from the New Zealand Police and six from the private sector. Three learners experienced significant changes in their employment status requiring reorganisation and refocusing of their final projects and the accompanying assessments.

Original Pilot	Post Pilot
8	4
Otago Polytechnic	Private Sector
4	6
Police Youth Aid	
2	

All bar two of the learners interviewed graduated with a Bachelor of Applied Management, six with Business Excellence majors, two with Business Transformation and Change, one with Sales and Marketing major, one with Human Resources major, one with an unspecified major and one learner graduated with a Graduate Diploma in Strategic Management and a Bachelor of Social Services. One interviewee completed the 4 level 7 papers of the BSS as part of the police Youth Aid pilot.

Bachelor of Applied Management	Learners	Notes
Business Excellence major	6	
Business Transformation and Change major	1	
Human Resources Management Major	1	
Sales and Marketing major	1	
Unspecified major	1	
Graduate Diploma in Strategic Management	1*	* Same person

Bachelor of Social Services (BSS)	1*
YAO 4 paper programme from BSS	1

Only two employer/sponsors responded to interview requests, although the two senior officers for the Royal New Zealand Police College, responsible for the Police Youth Aid training programme, were interviewed both as learners and as sponsors of the WBL pilot with training oversight of a number of Police YAO cohorts.

## Emergent Themes

### Part One: Learner perspectives

#### Key reasons for choosing to undertake the WBL degree programme

Learners from the WBL programme reported three main reasons for undertaking the WBL degree programme:

- the ability to keep working and earning while gaining a degree level qualification;
- the adult learner-centric focus and the way it offered the opportunity to add value to the individual's professional identity, work role, confidence and status;
- the direct relevance and integration of the programme of study with the challenges and issues faced in the workplace.

The following quotes illustrate the key reasons why learners chose this mode of learning:

- *I've got 2 young children – I can't leave and go back to university, and this was the first time I saw an opportunity come up that was absolutely able to be tailored to what I needed, but able to do for my job. ... I need the income from my job, and my family. Even doing some kind of correspondence degree would have been too difficult for me, but the fact that this was integrated with my work, was the thing as an adult learner, I guess, was the thing that was most attractive about it. It was like "Actually I can do this!" and I don't have to leave my family and I don't have to leave my job.*
- *Well as an adult learner it was important to me to have an experience where I was not only working, but also adding value to my workplace and that's the reason why I chose this model it was because it gave me that opportunity to not leave the workplace and go to a traditional interactive classroom setting, but still get the academic principles in place. The chance to apply my learning directly and immediately into the work I was doing.*
- *It suited me perfectly. I had a lot of experience in the workplace but I did not have the qualification to enhance my experience. Working on projects in the workplace also assisted in the position I was in at the time and it also suited me to put theory to practice.*
- *Because it was best suited to my current role and I was able to continue working full time and the actual year 3 WBL project provided a practical win-win for study and achievement within my workplace.*

- *It would enable me to do so (study) while I was working, that was primarily why I chose this one.*
- *The fact that it recognises what you already know, so you're not having to regurgitate all that stuff, which can be very off-putting. For me it was about time, because I wanted to get it done... if I had to start at the beginning I would never have got there, I would have just stepped away.*

### **Motivation to undertake tertiary study**

Closely allied to the previous theme is that of the key motivational drivers to undertake tertiary study. Broadly, these fall into two categories:

- the desire for self-improvement and professional credibility, often allied to a sense that earlier educational experiences were less than optimal
- the need to gain new knowledge and understandings of the challenges being faced in the workplace and the development of the skills to more effectively manage the changes, challenges and innovations needed by the organisation.

The following quotes illustrate this theme:

- *I knew I was undereducated for the role, I was experienced as I needed to be, but undereducated, and I was very grey about where I was going, I had some ideas that I carried on using which was great, but what I found with going into this role, even with my first conversations with the Polytechnic, (that it) was helping me really clearly articulate what I was trying to achieve and where I was and the whole process has helped me do that and helped me learn where to take it.*
- *... it became really apparent to me as I developed and grew in that role and the other people in the office were encouraging and pushing me forward, they all had a degree in either commerce or marketing and had all got them at 20 ... I was very good at some fundamental things that I had learned from some of the top people in the world. I was very good at speaking and training and coaching and all sorts of stuff but when I offered these skills to my boss she ... actually said to me "You don't have a degree, I can't possibly put you in front of my clients without expertise of a degree."*
- *The main reason was that it was a personal goal for me, my desire to gain a degree level qualification and probably that was further enhanced by my girls starting tertiary studies.*
- *Well basically, I've always had a desire to obtain an academic qualification, especially in the field of HR, because the majority of my work is based around the training and development of our employees in our department. And also I believe it was time for me to think strategically for my future in terms of where I identified the need for that role in the company.*
- *... I had teenagers and it was validating for them how important it was getting those pieces of paper and actually having defined qualifications. In the work place these days having a lot of work history is great, the experience is great, but without recognised qualifications it's very anecdotal and very limited to a geographical area. Like all the work I had done was from Alexandra, so other businesses looking at me as a new employee, knew me based on the local businesses where I had worked, but once you move to the likes of Dunedin, they don't know the businesses and the*

*business owners of the where you had worked before, so they've really got no gauge as to who you are, what you know, or what you've done.*

- *I really wanted to progress in my career and found I was missing out on positions because I didn't have a tertiary qualification.*
- *... once I identified that I could link in what I was doing on a daily basis to work towards a qualification rather than it being another whole addition, it just made sense for me to do that. Also I wanted to refresh my understandings against where I thought I was at, I was trying to gauge, well where am I at? How big is the gap in knowledge have I got and what else have I got to learn type thing?*
- *Well, as I was in the role of senior training officer for the Youth Aid qualifying course I thought it would be useful if I did the same programme that I was expecting other YA Officers to do*

### **Rewards and challenges of the WBL programme**

All learners reported that their WBL experience was challenging, but very positive, very rewarding. In particular three areas of the experience were highlighted:

- the one-on-one facilitation and academic mentor support was highly valued and appreciated;
- the direct application and relevance of the learning to the work with which learners were engaged
- the growth in personal confidence and an enhanced professional identity.

Some quotes:

- *Really eye opening, really fascinating. It was fantastic... Well, it (WBL) gave me a model to work from and it gave me the ability to understand how to work within the areas (of the project).*
- *The experience was very rewarding. I have developed as a person, I've made a lot of contacts through the WBL degree and I recommend this type of learning experience to others.*
- *The process was incredible, it was probably the most intense yet rewarding personal development I've ever done in my life and to go through that process I literally became 10 foot tall and bullet proof... So I think it's amazing, I just think it's an amazing programme, it's so different.*
- *Life changing, because it's huge, because I left school at 16...and got a job, but I always thought I was destined for bigger things, so it was actually... yeah life changing.*
- *Well the work-based project has led to international recognition within the global company. I'm on the radar is how the GM put it and personally a growth in self-belief.*



- *More confident as a manager, and more respected as a manager, I feel confident in myself in talking to peers and people in a similar or higher capacity and my knowledge of what my study entailed, the readings and everything that I did, will always be there... what I found the huge benefit of the WBL was that it was all related to your work. It was highly relevant.*

### **The power of the WBL learning process**

Learners highlighted a variety of positive aspects of their WBL experience. The most commonly reported was that of the excitement in engaging with the actual learning process and in particular the power of the learning method which for some was both transformational and ignited a strong desire to continue learning beyond the programme.

The following quotes illustrate this theme:

- *The one-on-one was great. I think for me the motivation I had towards actually learning... it came right near the end ...And that whole process was fascinating and that I could actually do that. I'm really proud of myself that I could do that.*
- *The learning process was so challenging for me to meet the academic standards, to understand - because I'm a doer – so to be able to articulate that and to get the discipline to actually do it – to learn to write the reports, learn to write the content – to have the patience and perseverance to do that and see it through, I think those are all keys... and you know....yep!*
- *Learning new study skills like interview skills, researching, the referencing, the APA referencing and all that academia. The people, I met some lovely people, both through the poly and through my research and just how happy people were to help me. I'm not very good at asking for things. I'm used to being independent and not asking people for help. Like even my own children, they proof read my work and things like that and being challenged.*
- *It sparked a thirst for learning and carrying on, that I think is going to afflict me permanently, because I can't actually see me stopping, and I appreciate that there won't be programmes after the masters for me to carrying on with. ... It's impossible to think of me not carrying on learning something and this stage I can only see that in the management field.*
- *Opening up my mind through research, listening to others, or learning to listen better to others perhaps, thinking more critically and reflection and the practical workplace achievements, because I'm now in the final stages for the research for the new NZ reference book that we've been working on and it will hopefully go to print production next February, which is really great.*
- *I believe the whole learning experience of it. Yeah... the demands and knowing I can come up with the result at the end of it and that I was up to the standard too, I was quite pleased naturally in getting that far and getting the qualification.*
- *The information I learned, being challenged a little bit, being gently nudged out of your comfort zone, I quite liked that as well. The fact that I could link what I was doing completely to the job I was doing, so the learnings and my position here was very strongly linked together.*

- *The fact that I could apply it directly to the work I was doing – the alignment between my work and what I was learning. The whole thing about reflecting on how I work and what I do, that was massive. It's something I sort of do anyway, but this was more structured and it really opened my eyes to how powerful it is.*

### **Issues of isolation, unclear expectations and structure**

Several different instances of significant challenge were identified:

- feelings of isolation and lack of connection with others going through the programme at the same time, wanting more opportunities to connect with others, i.e. regional workshops, use of social media etc.
- concern at lack of structure at the start, some felt they were left to flounder for too long
- feeling that facilitators need to be more proactive at the start
- structure of Learning agreement process too complicated and confusing, needs more streamlining and not always appropriate, such as for BSS candidates
- not having any clear idea of what was expected or what level of depth was required.

Some quotes:

- *I think getting a bit more help in getting started.*
- *I wished could have had something more structured in terms of when to meet, at the start like once every couple of weeks to meet or something like that diarised in rather than whenever you felt the need, otherwise you can drift out there a bit.*
- *A more structured approach and timeframes and deadlines.*
- *It's not just geographic isolation. It's nice to know there are others out there, because you quite often come across things and you think, "Wow! That was really helpful." And if you knew of other people that were doing say Business Excellence, you could say "Well have you come across this, because this was really good"*
- *...the lack of face to face interactions on a regular basis - that would have been very much more helpful..*
- *Some type of social media to enable learners to connect and share ideas and experience with each other...it can be quite isolating.*

### **Meeting expectations**

Across the board, learners felt that their expectations of what the programmes and method of studied offered were exceeded, in some cases significantly so. It's possible to argue that this comes off a base of relatively low or unclear expectations, but the following learner responses would seem to suggest that the WBL method of learning resulted in surprisingly high levels of achievement and self-discovery.

The following quotes illustrate this theme:

- *My expectations were well met and more. I got a lot more out of the degree than I realised I would, I learnt so much about myself.*
- *Generally, they were met with the ease of tutor (facilitator), accessibility and support - that was well above expectation.*
- *I think they were exceeded, yes very much so. I think the whole learning and with the approach of my mentors. I had a whole lot put on my plate and it was like, "Now you're getting there, you're getting close, but how about adding something like this into your presentation how about bringing in some Taylor or Minsberg and some whatever and doing it that way." And I found that approach, even though I found it quite stressful, it was very effective for me.*
- *Oh they were all exceeded I mean it was a really different journey, but one I really enjoyed at the other end. There were times when I thought, "Jesus, What am I doing?" Particularly when I had to do my presentation at the end of my 3rd year part, that was huge, because that was in amongst work.*
- *Oh exceed them heaps, I was blown away by how much it challenged me and how much I enjoyed it in the end.*

### **Personal benefits and growth**

Without exception all learners reported that they felt they had gained significant personal benefit from the programme. In most cases this was perceived as transformational, through an increase in their personal confidence, a strengthening of their professional role and identity, growth in their capabilities and productivity along with other more tangible benefits such as enhanced credibility and career and/or promotional prospects within their workplace.

The following quotes illustrate this theme:

- *I think it's a huge thing. For me it's kind of a confidence thing, a pride thing, I feel now I'm actually qualified for my job, I think it's enormous. I learned a huge amount.*
- *Yeah absolutely, it's been amazing; I mean the confidence is 80% of the battle won. I already know what I know, but having the confidence to say that I know it and I can help you do that.*
- *Personally a whole lot more self-belief and a realization that leaving school at 16 because I was a dummy... nah that's just not true! And especially a whole lot more credibility around what I do, a lot probably from myself and ... and also from our peers.*
- *Absolutely. I just had a promotion in terms of my title and also the responsibilities and accountabilities that I had to implement. Yes it did and there's respect from my colleagues, I've certainly seen that changed as well, because of my professional development. My self-esteem and confidence has been enhanced...*
- *I think professionally and personally confidence wise. So I've got some consultancy work coming up that I would never have had the confidence to even suggest that I would help them with. And it's along the lines of the structuring theory of what they are doing. And now that I've got all this knowledge, it's almost like it's become a compulsion that you want to be able to share it and pass it on.*

- *Well the work-based project has led to international recognition within the global company. I'm on the radar is how the GM put it and personally a growth in self-belief. ... I am now recognised as the "go to" person in NZ for our consumables and accessories and brand...*
- *More confident as a manager, and more respected as a manager, I feel confident in myself in talking to peers and people in a similar or higher capacity and my knowledge of what my study entailed, the readings and everything that I did, will always be there.*
- *It's around strengthening, confidence and those kinds of things and a greater understanding of the theoretical aspects and applying those in a real life situation. The whole passing it on to others in terms of the learnings, the whole mentoring thing I can do with others now.... So there are lots of different angles and there have been opportunities been created through that.*
- *I think personally I have learned more about myself and the way in which I work and in terms of the organisation, from a strategic point of view I have a much clearer understanding how organisations look at the future and structure stuff, and obviously personally it makes you feel pretty good about yourself. And also just the fact that I now have pieces of paper alongside me that can support me in other work as well.*
- *Professionally, it's definitely given me credibility with Youth Aid staff around the country, because I'm able to talk about it and give them my experiences of it, but also because I'm now being used as a phase two reviewer of the work... professionally it means it's made me more visible to the staff and it's made me aware of what's going on out there, so it's given me a better overview of what's happening.*

### **Benefits to the organisation**

Learners were also able to identify the tangible benefits that accrued to their employing organisation as a result of the WBL programme undertaken.

The following quotes illustrate this theme:

- *I feel I know how to plan, I know where our weaknesses are, I know where we need to get better... I feel I know where we're good and we can leave it, and I know where we need to make improvements.... the biggest thing for me is that I don't go with my assumptions anymore, at all. I test everything and that was a huge learning thing for me ... One thing I've got much better at is reading the data and listening to it: looking for the evidence.*
- *Systems! Definitely systems. I've got bits of paper and processes for everything, including staff leave. This is just about unheard of in non-corporate farming, ... If you want to run it at the level we want to run ours, it needs systems and structure and we run it more like a business now.*
- *In terms of the value, it's understanding where we're going, and how the objectives of Human Resources Management meet the larger business objectives, and so yes that's the value and also streamlining processes, ensuring compliance, having the expertise of researching information and getting that information into the company and making sure we are doing things right and doing the right thing.*

- *I think they benefited enormously. The 2 projects I developed – one has been implemented, the other I used to work on managing change with staff which also was very successful.*
- *There have been back-end savings of costs and it's been absolutely fantastic, because I did quite a bit of research on aged stock and why things hadn't been attended to. We have divested quite a lot and we've made a lot of savings and we've rationalised our stock holdings, and also, through this process we've identified further distribution opportunities, it wasn't just a case of putting aged stock into a wheelie bin, it's how we capture and get back some of these costs. It's been great.*
- *Yeah well I've achieved all the goals and aspirations that my boss set for me and I've used a lot of the learnings I got from the programme and I've applied those and over a pretty short period of time I've pretty much transformed this learning environment group into something that's getting pretty highly effective and there was some significant change required. Just following what I've learned going through the process and the framework and stuff, that definitely helped.*
- *Just seeing the change in attitudes I guess from some.... It's quite good I guess, because we're coming to the end of... we offered the programme to senior practitioners as well, and that's sort of phasing out now, but it's interesting to hear or to see how, some very old school ideas and thoughts and people who have been in Youth Aid for many, many years, seeing them visibly... you can actually hear their thought patterns changing. So that's really good, and it's good for the new trainees, because we're teaching them a good practice at the beginning so we don't have to change those bad habits.*

### **Supporting the learner**

Universally, learners reported that the level and quality of support from Capable NZ facilitators and academic mentors was of a very high standard and very much appreciated. It also suggests that the one-on-one facilitation and academic mentoring is correctly focused in terms of not spoon feeding learners, but rather strongly challenging them in ways that promote deep and effective learning.

The following quotes illustrate this theme:

- *Fantastic, they were really good with me, because if someone had pushed me too much I would have just got too stressy. And 'cause you are trying to hold down quite a good job, and I would have just got too stressed, and they kind of left me to my own devices, and I thought it was great.*
- *They were so talented in the way they got to know me very, very quickly and used my strengths as they saw them to get the best out of me.*
- *Really, really good actually. I've recommended it to so many people. I wouldn't have recommended the programme if Otago Poly and Capable in particular, probably more so than the Poly, hadn't got me through... Sometimes I wanted the facilitator to help me a little bit more and I want to say "Give me the answers." But ... I wouldn't have grown from the experience if he hadn't done it that way.*
- *I have to say I'm very indebted to my facilitators and their academic direction did allow me to think. You know they gave me the ingredients, but it was up to me to take those ingredients and bake a cake out of it. It was good, you know they were critical*

about it, they said I had to think about it, how I can bring it together to form my outcomes that I projected in the first instance. So yes they were very supportive, and I think Capable NZ is doing a fantastic job.

- *In the degree I had the most fabulous Academic Mentor he was fantastic.*
- *I had tremendous support by a very caring facilitator and other staff who were equally supportive.*
- *Generally outstanding, friendly, informative and supportive*
- *The support that I got, it was fantastic, yeah it was fantastic.*
- *It was pretty good it was .. as proactive as it could be, because the facilitators were learning as they were going as well, so they were asking us for feedback on the process as well as the actual content of the programme. I mean it was very positive, if we needed assistance we asked and we got it type thing, it was reasonably proactive.*
- *Very good! I know it wasn't the same for the others as it was for me, but for me it was very good. So I enjoyed the relationship that I had with her on that level and she would meet up with me if and when I needed it. I didn't bother her too much, sometimes I got a bit stuck and we'd get together and we'd go through that and then move on. So I enjoyed it – it was just as and when I needed it and it was always 'in time' learning really.*

### **Room for improvement**

While learners were generally positive about academic mentoring and facilitation support there was an expressed concern that there was a lack of structure and help in getting started with a learning process that was unfamiliar and sometimes confusing. In particular, the Learning Agreement process was identified as a significant issue requiring more structured support and direction. A sense of isolation was also commented on with suggestion that some sort of social networking software might help in reducing this sense of isolation.

The following quotes illustrate this theme:

- *I think getting a bit more help in getting started. I'm not a 100% sure... why the learning agreement has to be quite so complete at the start, because it sort of held me up, and I'm sure you've heard that before, but I understand now why it had to be there. It's real barrier, it's a real barrier, it's like it's almost too early on in the piece. It's almost like you have to know it before you've learnt it to complete the agreement.*
- *I wished could have had something more structured in terms of when to meet, at the start like once every couple of weeks to meet or something like that diarised in rather than whenever you felt the need, otherwise you can drift out there a bit.*
- *...also the lack of face to face interactions on a regular basis that would have been very much more helpful in terms of having more efficiency.*
- *I'd just come back to the exemplars even if it's just a loose frame. A more structured approach and timeframes and deadlines.... most people respond to deadlines.*

- *It's not just geographic isolation. It's nice to know there are others out there, because you quite often come across things and you think, "Wow! That was really helpful." And If you knew of other people that were doing say Business Excellence, you could say "Well have you come across this, because this was really good"*
- *...the lack of face to face interactions on a regular basis - that would have been very much more helpful.*
- *Some type of social media to enable learners to connect and share ideas and experience with each other...it can be quite isolating.*
- *Probably more one on one meeting with the people involved, may have assisted to get a little more guidance.*

## **Discussion of the learner perceptions and experience of the WBL programme**

The high levels of satisfaction with the experience of and achievements in undertaking the WBL programme as reported by learners are testament to the efficacy and soundness of the WBL mode of higher education. It is also validation of the skills and knowledge of the facilitators and academic mentors who supported them. It is important to note that all who undertook the pilot and post-pilot WBL programme graduated with a bachelor's degree, almost all with exceptional results.

There is, of course, room for improvements in delivery of the WBL programme that can further enhance the learners' experience and their learning outcomes. There are several areas that can benefit from close attention.

### **1. Introductory Workshop**

Some learners who were able to attend an introductory workshop found this to be very beneficial in getting underway.

#### ***Recommendation 1:***

*Offer all WBL candidates the opportunity to attend a face to face group workshop in order to become appropriately inducted into the programme and oriented to the expectations, processes and specific nature of the WBL process.*

### **2. Unclear expectations**

A number of learners reported that they felt unclear about what was expected of them. In particular some reported difficulty in negotiating what seemed to them an oversized blank canvas compared to their earlier experience of a more traditional mode of education.

The feeling that they spent too long not knowing how to get underway, and how and what to focus on was prevalent. This was particularly evident in the early stage of developing the learning agreement. In some respects the very flexibility of the WBL mode and its potential for change can be a barrier to learning as the lack of known or mandated boundaries can be an overwhelming experience.

### ***Recommendation 2:***

Develop a structured and pro-active process to facilitate an efficient and time delineated engagement with the learning agreement process. Strategies like setting timeframes and milestones for learners and closely monitoring progress at the early stages to get forward momentum can help learners bring their ideas into focus more quickly.

Greater formal or direct instruction in the development process of the learning agreement would also help, particularly in the process of identifying and articulating learning outcomes and the means by which they can be met. This is something that most, if not all learners, struggled with and to a large extent it was the very unfamiliarity of the language and concept of learning outcomes that was the main barrier.

Consideration should be given to the development of an introductory module on writing up the learning agreement process, delivered either as face-to-face workshops or as facilitated online module.

### **3. Study groups**

In one instance, an informal study group was formed among a small number of learners. While their WBL projects were entirely different, the participants found this a very helpful form of peer support providing the opportunity to discuss issues, bounce ideas off of each other and help navigate the tricky landscape of independent study. The informal study group also served to reduce some of the isolation that a number of learners reported experiencing.

### ***Recommendation 3:***

Assist learners to form informal study groups; in person where geographically co-located and virtually where geographically distributed.

### **4. Geographical and social isolation**

The issue of geographical and social isolation was raised in a number of interviews. It was felt to be a major factor in terms of a lack of peer interaction, support, non-formal feedback or sharing of issues that were not considered appropriate or useful for facilitator involvement. Several have suggested that some form of social media platform could be useful in providing a broad base of peer interaction and support across disciplines and from those that are either further through the programme or have completed.

Provide learners with access to a moderated social media platform to fill their peer support need. Overseas experience shows that there is often a strong sense of collegiality generated in this way and that people chose to maintain connections with the group even after they are no longer involved in the programme of study. This may also address the informal study group needs of those learners who are so inclined.



## Part 2: Employer / Sponsors perceptions of the WBL programme

### Organisational benefits of WBL

Senior managers responsible for learners in the workplace have a very positive view on the impact on and benefit to their organisation. Some quotes:

- *Yes, well R's grown dramatically with the structure he received from it... now I'm watching him come to me with stuff that actually makes a big difference to the business as far as the internal profitability is concerned... It would be great if I could have these sorts of outcomes with every person coming off a training thing, but that's not always possible. If I thought I could get this much out of it and could add this much value to every one of my employees, I'd be happy to do it for all of them.*
- *In terms of expectations, we are now starting to see our staff thinking a lot more broadly, which is exactly what we wanted... They appear more rounded in their decision making and they've got a lot more self-awareness around things like the influences that impact on their lives and why the young people act the way they do.*
- *It has been very beneficial... we've got a more focused M. She's always been constructive in what she's done, but we're getting a better proposition from her now, and more understanding and structure and structure's important. She's actually understood how a company with 65,000 employees works and she certainly enjoyed it. We have seen the upside, I mean in terms of inventory we probably would be still sitting on inventory that we didn't require, so there's a cost save to the business as well and again as a shareholding business we have to save where we can.*
- *Just seeing the change in attitudes I guess from some.... it's interesting to hear or to see how, some very old school ideas and thoughts and people who have been in Youth Aid for many, many years, seeing them visibly... you can actually hear their thought patterns changing. So that's really good.*

### Understanding the WBL model

Employer understanding of the WBL model and what it meant in terms of a tripartite partnership arrangement and the associated responsibilities appears quite limited and suggests that more effort needs to be put into upfront engagement with employers in order to have them appreciate their role and responsibilities in relation to the WBL programme. Some quotes:

- *No not till she actually told me what she wanted to do and she sent me some documents on it and I read them. It has to fit our organisation.... it's what the group's going to get back from it.*
- *No, not really, but I thought from what R described that it might be useful.*

### Employer motivation for supporting employee to undertake the WBL programme

The employers interviewed were very clear on the need for the programme to align with their organisational strategy and needs and to provide the learner with the necessary skills to take on the required tasks. It was also seen as a risk mitigation strategy in terms of retaining a valued employee.

Some quotes:

- *...in R's case there was nowhere further he could go within the organisation at that point in time, so rather than risk losing him, because I do believe he needs to spend a*

*bit more time with us... We sat down with him and worked out that some offsite training down the HR route would be advantageous to him and it would also help us to take a look at ourselves and our processes, so we agreed on the course at Otago (Polytechnic), and he's done very well with it.*

- *When she first came to us and explained what she wanted to do and it obviously entailed what we wanted, we were quite clear and specific. We have a part of our business that deals with consumables, which is a large part of our business in terms of turnover, but extremely large in terms of profit and it just needed a complete shake up..... we felt that extra learning would support her in what she wanted to do which was going for more training in a marketing role.*

### **Employer support**

Apart from financial and study leave support, the employers interviewed also took a direct interest in what their employee was doing in the project phase of the WBL programme and were engaged in ensuring that the organisation's interests were integrated into the learning.

Some quotes:

- *M kept us informed all the way. She and I meet every 2 weeks, she'd come to me with the different projects and we'll sit down and go, "Yes I'd like a bit more of that – that bit's not relevant to us today – That's more European, this is more relevant to us, however you now need to manage with the Europeans how you tell them politely that that's European and not relevant to us."*
- *I just needed to get him into a space and surround him with people who actually look at the practical function of HR, rather than the theoretical function. He drove that as well, you know he's very motivated to get out there*

### **Discussion of the employer / sponsor perceptions and engagement with the WBL programme**

The employers interviewed were highly positive about their perceptions of the benefits the WBL programme accrued to their organisation and to their employee's professional development. It is clear however, that their understanding of the WBL model, how it operated, their role and responsibilities for their employee learner and what input they could have into the design or requirements of the WBL projects was very limited.

This suggests that Capable NZ's employer engagement process and practice is underdeveloped, which is probably a consequence of being at such an early stage in the evolution of Otago Polytechnic's WBL model. The fact that there were a very small number of employers or sponsors willing to be interviewed has not helped in developing a more in-depth understanding of the employer's perspective and appreciation of the potential value this model of professional development might have.

In addition, several learners had the experience of their employment circumstances changing significantly, either through restructuring or other circumstances. While this was accommodated for the learner through a re-negotiation of the learning agreement and its learning outcomes, it did result in the employer, in effect, removing themselves from the partnership arrangement.

It has to be said however that this may also have been a consequence of the lack of formal engagement with the employer at the beginning of the programme, or at least at the learning agreement negotiation stage. Had this been properly attended to, there may still have been a need to re-negotiate the learning agreements, but there might have been the possibility

that the employer, through persuasive discussion, could have been retained in the partnership to provide their perspective and strategic need.

More recently there have been efforts to engage more comprehensively with one or two employers and at the earliest stage possible. However this protocol has not yet been fully adopted and more emphasis and effort needs to be focused in this area. This is essential if the WBL model that Otago Polytechnic has adopted is to fulfil its purpose of employer engagement at an innovative, effective and fit for purpose manner rather than pay lip service to this stated objective.

It is also in the learner's interest to have the employer properly engaged in the WBL process so that the full potential of the higher education experience and benefits that may accrue to the employing organisation and the learner may be realised.

#### **Recommendation 5:**

Emphasise the need for employer engagement on the part of Capable NZ and more effort focused on giving full expression to the participatory relationship as part of the WBL partnership. To appropriately implement this recommendation protocols and policies need to be developed and facilitators need to be appropriately trained.

#### **Recommendation 6:**

Seriously consider appointing a suitably qualified and experienced person who can engage with employers so that they properly understand the potential of WBL for their organisation as a full partner in the process. Employers need appropriate facilitation to understand and appreciate the requirements and demands of the academic framework of the WBL model. However, to achieve the appropriate level of employer understanding and to facilitate maximum buy in of their engagement, it is important that the conversation is conducted in the language and context of business and industry rather than that of academia.

### **Part 3 – Facilitator perceptions of their engagement with the WBL programme**

#### **Understanding the theory and practice of WBL**

Given that there were only two facilitators involved for most of the pilot, it would appear that there is a lack of experience among more recently engaged facilitators. This accounts for some variation in the responses with respect of how well the theory, philosophy and practice of WBL is understood.

Some quotes:

- *I think I understand the concept and practice quite well, but I think I have a little bit of confusion around the place of workplace development in the WBL process.... there are multiple stakeholders if you like all learning about what this sort of theoretical construct looks like in practice.*
- *I think I have a reasonable understanding of the concept, but in practice I'm still a learner. I mean I've got two WBL candidates now and both are still sitting on their learning agreement, so I'm on a reasonably steep learning curve myself at the moment.... and because we're quite in the early stages of working in this paradigm, well I am anyway, it still feels a bit like the blind leading the blind slightly.*

- *I think pretty well in its original state, but I'm not sure what might be being articulated now*
- *I believe I fully understand the concept and practice of WBL. It is usually the learner or the employer or other people who aren't always so clear, and they don't always understand the differences between work place practice and academia.*
- *... I do believe I understand the concept and I do believe I understand something of the practice, but some of the details of the practice are still not clear for me. I think that a lack of training has hindered me, I think I have a lack of confidence around it.*

### **Preparation for engagement with WBL**

Those facilitators who came into the WBL programme post pilot and therefore with less experience with the WBL model, appear to feel they were not particularly well prepared to take on the role.

Some quotes:

- *I think my experience as an APL facilitator was formative in enabling me to step into the work-based arena. I guess participating in a series of workshops that were, I guess developmental, participating in discussions with team members here who were already working in this space and applying what I already knew to a broader context. We did some of that last year. That was helpful, though I guess it was still very formative at that time, and probably still is in lots of ways.*
- *As you know we had a series of sessions with Kris Bennett which was going through the kind of theoretical understandings and so on and that was enormously valuable. However, since then..... and I mean it's part of the reason I feel stalled I kind of need to talk through where I'm at, at any one time and there's often no one here to do that with.*
- *I think, given the combination of considerable experience with the APL model, and a willingness to engage in risky activity meant we were probably well prepared. I think the information that was made available was adequate at the time. With hindsight you can always do things differently, but I think overall it was pretty well supported.*
- *Some training was available and helpful, however the best way to fully embrace and understand it, is to do it, by engaging with people and support people as you learn. I found this to be most helpful. However that aside, there does need to be information, processes, systems, requirements, etc. available and accessible for people as they learn.*
- *I don't think I appreciated the difference between APL & WBL. Now that I've done a little bit, I don't have a lot of experience yet – I'm very much a learner still, I've started to appreciate what those differences are.*

### **A better preparation process**

Again those facilitators who came later to the WBL programme appear to feel that they would have benefitted from a more systematic and focused induction process.

Some quotes:

- *When you are in this sort of arena, I think you need really good leadership. If you are going to be innovative and out there and taking risks, because it's about risk management a lot of the time, and often it's the facilitator ... we are the ones that have to front up and it does feel like a high risk environment, so you need to know you've got a good solid structure behind you to support and I just don't feel that that's there.*
- *I think there's been no sense of team development, with a whole lot of new people having started or a sense of shared understandings around commonly used terms or language, particularly. I think those things are important because language constructs culture and meaningful dialogue. So there's quite a lot of talking past each other when we think we're talking about WBL. It means one thing to one person and something different to someone else.*
- *It's always difficult with a pilot to know how to do it, but I think if we were to re-do it now there were certainly some key learnings that came out of the early days.*
- *I do believe for those people who haven't been immersed in this kind of environment to be a little 'unsafe' if they are not fully instructed by the philosophies/systems/requirements/legislation etc. that is part of how we work and operate. So people need to be carefully contracted/selected into this work – they do need some background in education, coaching, facilitating, some high level of critical and analytical thinking – there are a raft of competencies needed and expected. This is not something that 'anybody' can do.*

### **Facilitating APL and WBL – the differences**

Respondents report that working in the WBL mode demands different skills and capabilities than facilitating APL candidates. While an APL facilitating background provides a solid foundation, working with WBL learners requires a significant extension of the facilitation skill set to accommodate these differences. It also suggests that people without a solid APL facilitation background will struggle to meet the demands of WBL facilitation.

Some quotes:

- *I think the biggest thing is the language and context of the workplace that's more to the forefront in WBL... I guess writing learning agreements has forced me to focus more specifically with matching experience with learning outcomes and assessment strategies, so that's sort of honed some of those skills that have always been there as a tertiary educator, that haven't used so much in APL.... But now in the WBL environment it has forced me to hone that up and make it much more specific, because it's now got to be approved so that it is academically credible. So that's forced me to do that.*
- *...it certainly changes the way I think about my language in terms of writing learning agreements and trying to think of the language of work as opposed to the language of the academy... With APL we were never taught we needed to know the context of our candidates, because they were bringing a body of knowledge that we just needed to help them unpack...*
- *For things to always be future focussed and new, so an understanding of global changes and innovative and creative ways of learning. It means I also need to be on my toes by scanning the environment in many contexts to know and understand the global and local challenges. ... The ability to help determine pathways for new learning/higher level*

learning is key. Another is the ability to work in different contexts i.e. with employers/organisations, to help them understand and learn and be able to support a learner. Another would be of being really effective in the writing and development of a learning agreement/an enquiry. This I believe is the bit that requires some good training around. It isn't easy – for the learner (often they don't know what they don't know; often they can't articulate what it is they need in order to grasp new concepts/ideas/challenges). Often the new learning or challenges are not straight forward, or there are many concepts needed. Another skill is the ability to be careful in the selection of an academic mentor – who can meet and support the skill level required and be of assistance and support.

- *..the key thing is that there has to be a willingness on the part of the facilitator to understand the workings of the sponsor. And that means for me...two-fold for me it means understanding how the outcomes will have benefit for the employer and also to engage with them professionally and properly throughout the process... a WBL candidate needs more direction initially..[but] once their learning agreement is sorted and their direction is set then their pathway becomes much clearer. I think the value of the LA is huge; it requires a lot of effort ...[but].. it certainly smoothes the process from that point through to completion. So if the LA is properly attended to then the actual project implementation becomes relatively straightforward. And for me the LA is the most significant part of the whole process.*
- *There are differences around time flow, a multi-step approach rather than one. I found that I have to make allowances, or plan a little bit more for the extra steps in the process... It tends to be, in my experience so far, more fragmented, not that that's a bad thing, but it's just different. I think there are skills required in negotiation and mediation and I think that's around talking with academic mentors and bringing those skills to the development of the learning agreement and talking with employers. So I think that time management, and the differentiation of skills between the facilitator and the academic mentor.*

### **Key benefits for learners**

Facilitators reported on a range of things they believed were of particular benefit to the learners, including:

- How the learning agreement focused and deepened the learning
- The future focus of the learning and its direct application to the work at hand
- Increase in confidence and professional capabilities
- The ability to effectively articulate their new learning and knowledge gain.

Some quotes:

- *I think the opportunity to really tailor their learning needs is a real benefit ... And that middle bit around the learning agreement the benefit of that is the crystallising of the direction, the orientation where it's learner centred, that's a benefit.*
- *Well I think having the structured support in terms of a mentor to help them to engage with project that is work based, which kind of takes them out of that work environment where there may be issues of power and control a more impartial kind of environment where they can show their vulnerabilities... And I think with the LA there is some stepping up for candidates/learners to be able to articulate what their learning is going to*

*be and own it..... I think is a great step in helping them think about their own processes, their own responsibilities for timelines, their managing of the project, which of course is what we want our learners to have and which people in the workforce kind of need to have anyway.*

- *I think for me it's two fold. The fact that they've got degree level learning that has tangible benefits for the employer ... secondly it enables them to further develop a professional career pathway. Given the right combination of candidate, employer and project it has the potential to really ramp up their capability.*
- *That it is future focussed for them, that it is new learning and often different challenges – so it is exciting and therefore the ability for creativity is rich.*
- *I think they have more challenges, WBL has more challenges and from my limited experience and perception, the learner knows that, because they are on WBL journey in order to know more and to grow more, ... I think another benefit is that they are able to articulate their knowledge at a more professional level, they have the opportunity to get their heads around their knowledge, I think they also have more understanding about their own learning. And ... [are] in command of their own learning.*

### **Challenges for the learners**

Issues of time and time management, changes in life and work circumstances, being in charge of and responsible for their own learning and what is sometimes perceived as an unstructured learning process are all seen by facilitators as some of the challenges that learners face in undertaking a WBL programme.

Some quotes:

- *... but as with all of us in our busy lives and complex worlds, finding the time and appreciating and valuing what it is that they are doing.... fitting it all in and keeping ... the complexity and messiness of work not to sabotage what you are doing. To make a small enough project or inquiry that will be meaningful to the organisation...[and be] ... achievable.*
- *I think the biggest one that I have struck is the fact that potentially the workplace circumstances are likely to change, particularly in the private sector... And while I think an employer may have had an initial understanding and actual ability to accept and support the project in no circumstances is there a plan B. So if that person's role changes or they move or transfer to another branch that continuity is potentially lost. So then the whole process has to be re-negotiated and so therefore there's the uncertainty, the doubt from the candidates point of view and the whole delay in the process.*
- *Having to think deeply and be open to changes. To be open to knowing that this will sometimes be hard – that there aren't always answers, but more learning and thinking and developing. To have the ability to have to take responsibility for a lot of their learning and not have it provided for them.*
- *Coming to terms with a perceived unstructured approach, which is about stepping into a tertiary learning environment, that certain WBL learners have preconceived notions about it being assignment based, that there'll be... a certain number of words put around these and they struggle with what they perceive as a lack of structure or lack of*

*boundaries. ...They might have left school at 15 or 16 and never engaged at this level before.*

## **Facilitator PD**

Professional development, peer review and effective mentoring/supervision were all cited as areas needing increased levels of attention and support. This was recognised as a problematic area, particularly with the level of contract and part-time employment arrangements in place and the serial restructurings at Capable NZ, which has made the scheduling of regular PD activities and peer review processes difficult to organise.

Some quotes:

- *We did have a fortnightly peer review meeting, but .., it's sort of been taken over and sort of higher level work allocation kind of stuff, so there is still nowhere we can go, "well next week we've got a meeting and I can talk about this candidate and there'll be people there who can help me."... a critical mass of people that all speak the same language and understand the same concept.*
- *And I have this idea.. it's possibly a fantasy... that we'd get some of these resources and all that in the one place in a coherent whole and it will somehow make my professional practice more solid. I know it will feel better, but that's not really developmental that's a little bit different. I think in a way you've got to have a solid base before you can launch new developments in a way I feel like the base isn't solid enough yet to be thinking about what more I need to add on. We're still trying to get the ground sorted. I guess the other thing is about the learning agreement, having a more streamlined and coherent process aligned with our other processes.*
- *At this stage I think the most valuable would be to have a forum for almost a case study presentation, where we can genuinely present case studies and genuinely present the challenges and rewards associated with them and I think the reverse of that is that we need to have follow up with companies and learners as soon as we physically can.*
- *The opportunity and time to investigate what has already been done – exemplars of best practice, exemplars of LA's, of ideas/concepts that turn learning on its head. Support groups for learning and exploring practice ... where genuine learning and understanding can take place.*

## **Discussion of facilitator perceptions of their WBL experience**

Several themes emerged from interviews with facilitators:

- Induction and preparation of new facilitator for WBL
- The lack of ongoing professional development
- Employment structure of Capable NZ impacting on informal workplace learning
- Facilitator role in employer engagement
- Academic leadership.

### **Induction of new WBL facilitators**

Some facilitators reported a perceived lack of adequate preparation for the WBL role, especially by those engaged post-pilot. This has led to feelings of confusion and low levels



of confidence for some in dealing with the nuances and complexities of a highly individualised and flexible education process, in which there is little direct similarity or alignment between learner contexts, projects or workplace demands and issues.

To be effective, WBL facilitation requires a highly-developed level of educational judgement and ability to apply that judgement to unfamiliar contexts. It also requires facilitators to be able quickly gain an appreciation and understanding of the learner's workplace situation, its culture and demands, which in many cases is very unfamiliar territory for the facilitator.

While a good grounding in APL processes and practices is useful, it does not require the same level of engagement with the learner's context or the problems and issues that the learner confronts in their workplace. Also WBL's future focus requires the learner to engage far more deeply with new learning and skills development than their APL counterpart, which in turn places a much greater demand on the facilitator for direction, support and sound educational judgement.

The particular skill set that WBL facilitation demands represents a big step up for new facilitators, even those with a good grounding in APL facilitation. It is also a very different and far more unstructured process than more traditional classroom teaching which in turn represents an even steeper learning curve for staff aspiring to be WBL facilitators who come from a more commonly understood classroom teaching and learning role.

The appropriate induction and preparation of new WBL facilitators and for that matter academic mentors, is an essential element in developing an academically robust and effective facilitator team who can support learners in the WBL model to achieve outstanding results. It also means that the process can be conducted far more efficiently and with a more precise focus on the part of the facilitator so that learners can progress more quickly with less inertia and confusion as they get to grips with their learning tasks.

The current practice of facilitators learning on the job, with minimal preparation or professional development, is inefficient, wasteful and does not serve the learner well.

### ***Recommendation 7:***

Establish a formal and properly focused and resourced process of induction and preparation of new WBL facilitators. Include provision for a buddy system where experienced facilitators can mentor and coach those new to the WBL model of higher education.

### **Ongoing facilitator professional development**

WBL is a relatively new field, certainly in New Zealand, and consequently there is little formal research or a well-developed knowledge base about the practice of WBL at degree level and above. There is however substantial theory, case study research and professional development knowledge internationally, particularly from the UK and more specifically from Middlesex University's Centre for WBL, with whom Otago Polytechnic has a formal MOU. Middlesex University has three decades of WBL experience up to and including doctoral and post-doctoral level.

The New Zealand context does mean that any theory or practice knowledge has to be translated and/or adapted for local conditions and circumstances. It does, however, provide a sound basis from which valuable knowledge can be extrapolated and employed locally, but there needs to be a regular and focused engagement with this knowledge by the facilitator cohort for this to happen.

The innovation that the introduction of WBL at Otago Polytechnic represents can only last as long as the initial impetus and novelty of that innovation. This is finite and effort, energy and resources need to be applied to make sure the innovation is sustained to both become established as 'business as usual' with an embedded process of continuous improvement as well as continue to push out the boundaries of what's possible.

As with an appropriate new WBL facilitator induction and preparation process, the ongoing PD for facilitators is an essential element if WBL at Otago Polytechnic is to realise its full potential and play a significant partnership role with businesses locally, nationally and internationally.

This does require appropriate academic leadership to guide this engagement and an appropriate level of resourcing to sustain and grow the local skills and knowledge. It also suggests that a broad range of research needs to be fostered and encouraged to grow the local knowledge base.

### ***Recommendation 8:***

Provide regular, academically appropriate and practice focused WBL PD activities for facilitators, academic mentors and assessors. This is in order for practitioners to engage with the WBL knowledge base and to share insights, case-study experience, learner support strategies and new learning about WBL practice. In support of this PD, it is also recommended that research into the NZ context of WBL be actively encouraged, resourced and fostered.

Additionally, study leave and travel scholarships to visit centres of WBL excellence would also be of great benefit to Otago Polytechnic's development of their WBL model and its credibility as an internationally supported initiative.

### **The impact of Capable NZ employment structures on informal and peer learning**

Interview respondents commented on the fact that the current employment structures of Capable NZ, with its predominance of part-time and contract staff, preclude, or at least represent a barrier to valuable informal workplace learning and peer to peer interaction and support.

Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development (1978), Lave and Wenger's notion of Communities of Practice (1998), and Eraut's work on 'non-formal learning' all extoll the virtue value and power of informal learning, peer sharing of knowledge, practice apprenticeship (where the more experienced and knowledgeable coach and mentor the less experienced), and teaching/learning at the point of need. Workplace learning recently coined as informal learning, has come to be recognised as being equally important as formal learning and '*...needs to be seen as fundamental, necessary and valuable in its own right.*' (Coffield 2000)

The fact that most Capable NZ facilitators are either part-time or contract staff, means that there is no consistent group of facilitators in at Capable NZ's offices at any one time which not only makes any sort of peer interaction and informal dialogue about issues, concerns and ideas near impossible, but also makes organising regular PD activity extremely problematic to organise and ensure full participation.

Given the current employment structure of WBL facilitators, there is no simple answer to this conundrum. If all facilitators were employed in a less fragmented fashion, then the value of the informal learning potential could be more easily leveraged as well as make organising

regular facilitator PD a much simpler logistical proposition. However this is probably impractical at this still relatively early stage of development, but it is important to recognise the impediment to efficient and substantive development that this situation represents.

***Recommendation 9:***

Seriously consider reviewing the employment structure and conditions of Capable NZ's facilitators with a view to enabling regular PD activity and facilitating peer sharing, informal learning and targeted coaching and mentoring opportunities.

**Facilitator role in employer engagement**

One aspect of WBL facilitation where a number of facilitators felt inadequately equipped is that of their role in employer engagement. While the focus on the learner and their outcomes is to be lauded, it is nonetheless imperative that the employer and their understanding of their role and responsibilities receive their appropriate share of the focus.

The employer has a pivotal role in the WBL partnership and its neglect is at the expense of the learner. It is acknowledged that the employer role must be viewed in the context of their enterprise. For instance an employer in a business context might have very different perceptions of what is useful than say the manager of a counselling service. The former may have very specific ideas about how the business may be improved, while the latter's focus may well be more to do with the learner's own development of their counselling skills and their model of practice. In either case though, the employer's need and strategic focus needs to be included in the partnership arrangement, along with the development of the learning agreement and the nature of the proposed WBL inquiry or project.

Respondents reported a perceived lack of support for and focus on appropriate employer engagement. This is yet another area of PD that has, till now, been largely ignored. While it is not possible to categorically state that the lack of employer engagement resulted in a number of learners parting company with their employer or line manager, the fact that there was limited or no formally recognised employer relationship removed any possibility that the learner's position could be supported through effective advocacy by their facilitator.

***Recommendation 10:***

Establish protocols and policies to formally and actively include employer engagement in WBL programmes as a fundamental condition and that this is also made a focus of facilitator PD.

**Academic leadership**

Several respondents commented on a perceived lack of academic leadership for WBL that has resulted from personnel changes, whereby the person with the deepest understanding and the most experience and knowledge about WBL has been re-assigned to other projects. Capable NZ facilitators now have only limited access to this person for guidance and informed feedback about learner support and facilitation issues and this has left something of an academic leadership gap.

In some respects this seems to be the result of workload pressures and ongoing structural changes. This, it seems, has resulted in a lack of time and / or headspace to get up to speed with the literature and case study knowledge about effective WBL practice. This in turn has

led to some facilitators feeling adrift and without the support, guidance or ready access to informed academic leadership.

Further, the view has been expressed that decisions about the way forward for the WBL model are being made without an adequate grasp of the underlying theoretical and philosophical principles of the WBL model, or a full understanding and appreciation of the nuances and unique requirements of WBL facilitation practice.

***Recommendation 11:***

Recognise and address the important issue of continuity of and ready access to appropriate academic leadership for WBL. This current gap in academic leadership for WBL is perceived as being at the root of concerns about facilitator support, guidance, PD etc. If not dealt with properly, there is a strong possibility or even likelihood that further development of the WBL programme and its continuing evolution will stall and eventually become moribund.

## **Conclusions**

The findings from this research are consistent with the findings for the WBL pilot, that this is a very effective form of higher education and that learners both enjoy the experience of the process, the relevancy of the learning to their workplace challenges and the professional and personal growth that accrues to them. The perspectives of those involved, learners, employers and facilitators eighteen months on from the previous research has provided a clear picture of the value and possibilities of the WBL approach.

The success of the WBL initiative should also provide Otago Polytechnic with the encouragement and incentive to continue to grow this programme and invest in the PD of academic staff and in continued research to continue to improve the quality of the learning experience and refine the mode of delivery.

The small numbers of employers willing to participate in this research is something of a disappointment. Despite this, the responses reported by the employers/sponsors clearly indicate that there is much to be gained by having their employees undertake degree level WBL programmes.

The appropriate involvement of employers in the WBL process is something that needs further work, both in the resourcing and practice of effective engagement of employers in the WBL programme to ensure they are enabled to take full advantage of the potential for their organisation and their employees.

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