



# Work and Learning: Higher Education and the Curriculum of the Workplace

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# Welcome

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

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# Introduction

The integration of learning and work is not a new concept. From the middle ages professions such as medicine and law developed their skills in practice and then took their learning to the academy to codify as a body of professional knowledge. Learning through, at and for the purposes of work is now widely regarded as essential to increased productivity and is a growing concern to work organisations and national governments (Tan and Lee, 2024). The work and learning landscape is rapidly evolving, fuelled by technological innovation, including the rapidly emerging use of artificial intelligence, and the need to respond to massive economic, political and environmental challenges. Within the context of higher education the relationship between work and learning challenges not only established practices but also traditional concepts of individual and subject discipline based learning as real life work issues often go beyond individual learning and are rooted in a messy and rapidly changing organisational and work context.

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# Exploring the relationship between work and learning

# 01.

Work is intentional application of effort in order to achieve a work purpose. Work can be an individual or collective effort, may be remunerated or non-remunerated, and can take a wide variety of forms and be carried out in a range of work contexts. The challenges of organising and achieving the purposes of work and the social interactions involved are important sources of learning (Malloch et al., 2011). Learning is a process of change in an individual or group through activity. In the case of the activity of work the learning is secondary to the purposes of work. Such learning will be understood in the light of the experiences and perspectives of the individual, their work associates, and the imperatives and norms of the work context (Beckett and Hager, 2023). Such learning is often viewed as desirable as it can be associated with the positive development of work practices and thus “aligning workplace innovations and workers learning is helpful for both effective and adaptive workplaces and work practices and workers employability” (Billett et al., 2023, p. 233). However not all learning from engaging in work activity is positive, for example when an individual learns that it is not good for their standing in a work organisation to admit making a mistake or that it is better to remain silent rather than suggest change.

For learning to be of value in the context of work it must be capable of application in relation to the achievement of the purposes of work. This places an emphasis on identifying, utilising and measuring the performative value of learning and how it contributes to knowledge. Knowledge is possessed by individuals and enables them to make sense of data and information received. Mayo (2000, p. 523) argues that “all intellectual assets are maintained and governed by people”. Individual knowledge forms the basis for communication of information to others who will then make sense of it in the light of their own personal knowledge.

For individual knowledge to fully contribute to the purposes of work it must be shared and accepted by others. This can be problematic as individual knowledge is often unrecognised by the individual holding the knowledge. In such cases the knowledge is “tacit” and its use within the work context is limited. The facilitation of the recognition of knowledge (i.e. making tacit knowledge explicit) is of potential benefit to the work organisation as it enables the knowledge to be shared in order to achieve the purposes of work. The individual and social dimensions of learning and both tacit and explicit knowledge mean that leveraging individual and group learning to achieve work purposes is complex and is not automatic.

The ability of an individual to reflect upon their own work and the work of others is central to the relationship between work and learning. The ability to use such reflection skills to analyse action both during and after the action is what Schon (1987) describes as a ‘reflective practitioner’. Schon describes knowing-in-action as what we draw on in dealing with the routine problems of practice.

However, when something surprising or unexpected happens it is also possible to reflect on what’s going on in the midst of the activity itself. A consequence of this process, which he terms “reflection-in-action” is that thinking can lead to a “...reshaping of what we are doing while we are doing it” (Schon, 1987, p. 26). Reflection-in-action is important as it operates as an immediate critical evaluation of a way of doing something that may give rise to a change in how it is done.

Work places vary widely in their cultures and contexts and in the learning opportunities that they provide. Fuller and Unwin (2004) discuss the incidence and quality of workplace learning by means of a continuum ranging from restrictive to expansive learning environments. Characteristics of expansive learning environments include recognition and support for workers as learners and the use of workforce development to align the goals of the work organisation with the goals of the individual. Managers have a key role as supporters and enablers of learning through and for work. This might include such things as time allowances, appreciation of the value of reflection, opportunities to be proactive in the development of work practices and access to other individuals or groups (communities of practice) within the work organisation. Ellstrom (2011) also highlights that problems arising from varied and complex tasks plus opportunities for feedback, evaluation and reflection are characteristics of enabling learning environments. In stark contrast restrictive learning environments are characterized by limited concepts of the value of learning beyond the immediate requirements of current work. Managers are likely to be highly directive and focused on short term work objectives and allow little or no scope for staff to question or be involved in the development of work practices.

In both expansive and restrictive learning environments individual engagement is a key element in determining how individuals engage with the opportunities to learn available to them (Billett, 2011). These learning opportunities may be planned or unplanned. Thus learning “includes two essentially different types of process: an external interaction process between the learner and his or her social, cultural and material environment, and an internal psychological process of elaboration and acquisition in which new impulses are connected with the results of prior learning (Illeris, 2011, p. 35).

Consideration of the relationship between work and learning highlights the importance of the dynamic interplay between individual preunderstanding, the work context and the work activity being undertaken. In the context of work the performative value of learning leading to explicit knowledge creation and application is too important to be left unplanned. Learning developed for, at and through work has major potential advantages not just for the individual but potentially for those engaged in the wider work context and, where applicable, the employing work organisation.

## Work-Based Learning: A New Higher Education?

# 02.

Partnerships between employers and universities are very long established in respect of activities such as research and technology transfer and student work placement. Underpinning these activities is a paradigm which centres upon the university as the expert generator of knowledge and the work context as the domain where the knowledge is put into practice. However, in order to fully engage with learning in, at and for the purposes of work higher education has had to recognise that work not only has learning needs but is also an activity which generates learning and new knowledge and that some of this work-based knowledge might be at a higher education level! A range of government funded initiatives in the early 1990s were instrumental in making this shift and led to programmes in several universities which were explicitly “work-based”. Brennan and Little (1996), in the first comprehensive overview of work-based learning in UK universities, highlighted how work-based learning was concerned with knowledge that was highly contextual, practically focused and often unsystematic and noted that these were attributes identified by Scott (1994) as Mode2 and contrasted with the Mode1 knowledge categorised in subject disciplines which were linear, formal, cumulative and generalisable. Work-based learning was described by Boud and Solomon (2001, p. 1) as “one of the very few innovations related to the teaching and learning aspects of post-secondary education that is attempting to engage seriously with the economic, social and educational demands of our era”. Gibbs and Garnett (2007, p. 411) define work-based learning higher education programmes as “a learning process which focuses university level critical thinking upon work (paid or unpaid), in order to facilitate the recognition, acquisition and application of individual and collective knowledge, skills and abilities, to achieve specific outcomes of significance to the learner, their work and the university”.

Boud and Solomon (2001) also identified that the distinctive features of university work-based learning stem from a partnership between a university and an external organisation or community of practice specifically established to foster learning. Work-based learning programmes are negotiated and, most significantly, derived from the needs of the workplace and the learner rather than the traditional disciplinary curriculum of the university. A key element of this new provision, according to Boud and Solomon (2001, p. 6), was the assessment of negotiated programmes against standards which “are of necessity transdisciplinary”.

‘Transdisciplinarity’ is concerned with creating new integrative knowledge to address complex real world problems and is primarily emergent, complex and embodied (McGregor, 2015). Costley (2015) examines examples of the work-based learning curriculum to illustrate how transdisciplinarity occurs in higher education programmes of study. The emphasis on learning being “work-based” and the knowledge generated often best seen as transdisciplinary signalled a paradigm shift from the traditional subject discipline based curriculum of higher education.

Middlesex University was an early pioneer of work-based learning at higher education level in the UK as a consequence of a research project in the early 1990s which explored the proposition that there was a “curriculum in the workplace”. The project highlighted that workers had to improve their knowledge and skills on an ongoing basis in order to be effective and to meet the evolving demands of their work and that much of this learning was gained from the experience of work. The learning demonstrated by workers was identified, evidenced and accredited as being worthy of general credit at higher education level but did not fit neatly into any of the subject discipline based programmes of the university. In order to engage with such “work-based” learning the university recognised ‘Work-Based Learning’ as a ‘field of study’ in its own right, rather than just a ‘mode’ of study (Portwood, 2000; Gibbs and Garnett, 2007). This was a radical approach which had to win approval from the Academic Board of the university and paved the way for a work-based learning curriculum which was essentially transdisciplinary in nature and drew heavily upon the established learning technologies of independent learning (Garnett, 2012). The case of the introduction of work-based learning at Middlesex University illustrates how this significant educational development drew upon and, in some cases, modified existing university structures and procedures (see Figure 1). Such curriculum innovation was a dynamic process within the work context of the university and opened up new ways of working with employer partners.

The typical starting point for many individual work-based learning programmes was a reflective review of learning leading to formal accreditation via Recognition of Prior Experiential Learning (RPEL). The use of transdisciplinary rather than solely discipline based frames of reference for assessment enabled individuals to claim for the full extent of the learning they had achieved rather than just that which happened to match prescribed subject outcomes (i.e. general rather than specific credit). The use of general credit greatly enhanced the academic status attached to learning from work and challenged the university monopoly as provider of high status learning (Armsby et al., 2006; De Graaff, 2014).

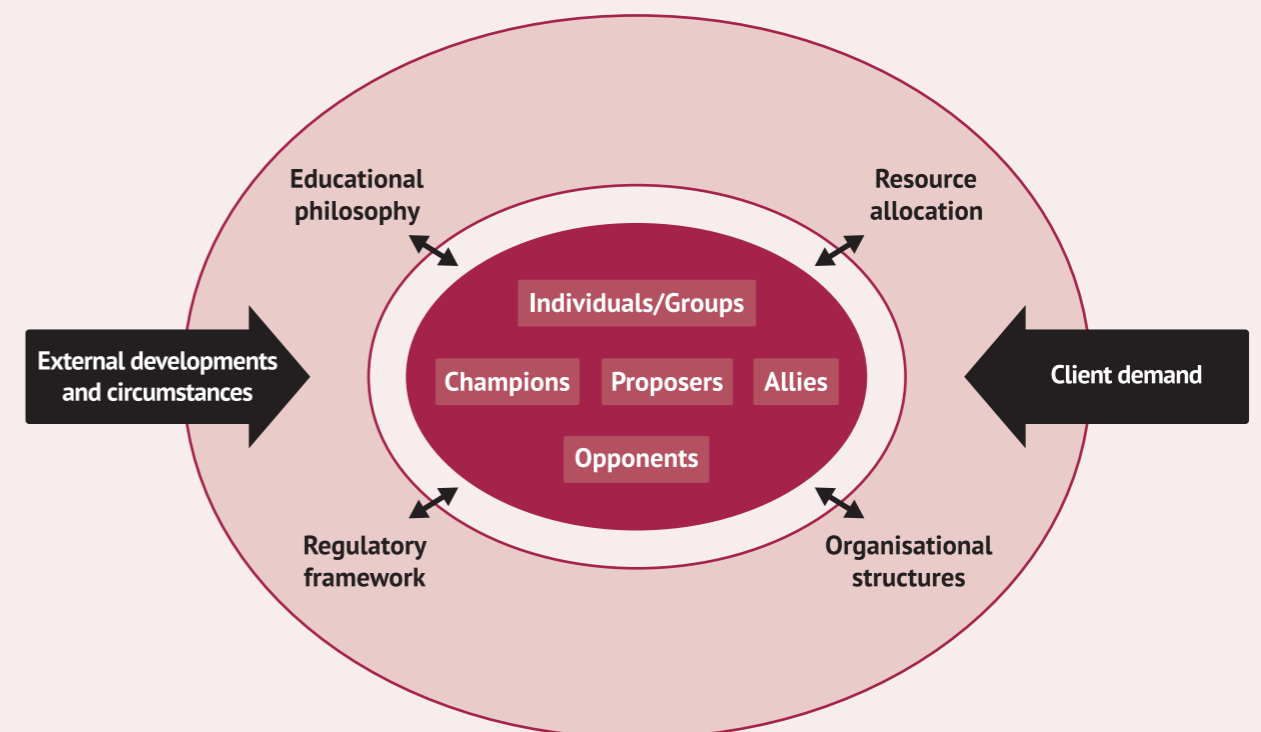
# 02.

Once the individualised starting point was established by RPEL the next stage in a work-based learning programme was typically the production of a three-way negotiated learning agreement between the student, their employer/ sponsor and the university. The learner has responsibility for negotiating a customised programme demonstrating coherence and progression to an appropriate award. Such a programme might include traditional subject modules and at least one major work-based project. The concept of the real-life, work-based project is a central feature of work-based learning. The work-based project is important as a vehicle to focus university support and higher education level critical thinking to achieve learning outcomes not just of significance to the learner and the university but also to the employer and/or other stakeholders. Costley and Aboukari (2015) highlighted the potential of work-based projects at master’s level (level 7) to be of direct benefit to the employer. Because of the individualised and contextualised nature of these negotiated work-based learning programmes the academic tutor often acted more as a facilitator and critical friend, rather than a subject expert (Boud and Costley, 2007).

The typical components of an individually negotiated work-based learning programme are shown in Figure 2 below and illustrated in the case of “Kayley” described in Tables 1 and 2. Note the vital role of academic credit as a common currency enabling the recognition of learning from experience and the incorporation of that learning into a customised programme of study leading to a higher education award.

Costley (2015, p. 126) points out that “methodologies that have been constructed for the purposes of distinct academic disciplines, do not necessarily hold effective and appropriate approaches to generate and codify a practice-orientated production of knowledge”. In work-based learning the context and purposes of work have consequences for the value and use of knowledge and the nature of knowledge claims that have value. This has important implications for designing professional inquiry as part of the work-based higher education curriculum (Costley et al., 2010; Walsh, 2011 and Wall, 2016). In order to achieve specific outcomes of significance to other practitioners, research must not only stand up to academic critique but also deliver outcomes applicable to work in a timely and appropriate manner.

**FIGURE 1: The university context for the development and implementation of work-based learning**



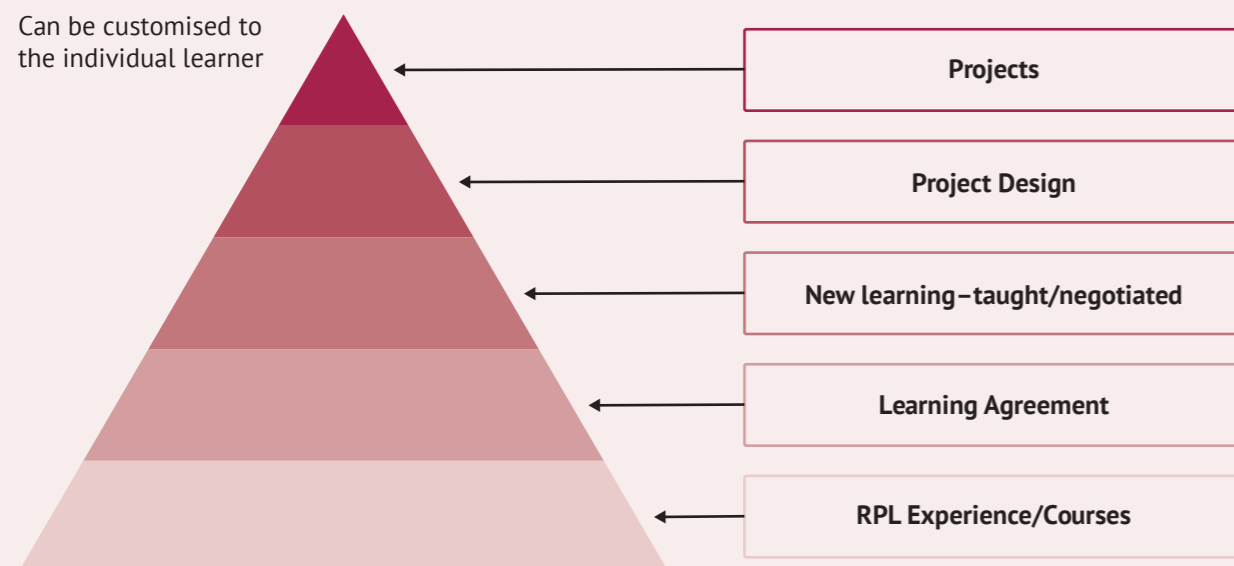
## 02.

The use of academic credit and the willingness to use the accreditation powers of the university were also critical to recognising and building upon planned learning designed by employers or contracted third parties. This enabled the learning outcomes of activities such as in-company training programmes and organisational competency frameworks to be recognised as higher level learning and potentially incorporated into a programme of study leading to a higher education qualification. Accreditation of employer based training in particular enabled customisation of work-based learning to move from being centred primarily upon the individual work-based learner to being customised at the level of an individual employer partner (e.g. Bravenboer, 2018). This approach led to a significant growth of higher education partnerships with employers based upon learning and development (Dhillon et al., 2011). The added value of accreditation of employer-led learning by a university include enhanced status and access to a university qualification (Minton and Fenwick, 2011). The introduction of assessment required in order to lead to academic credit

also provides the employer with evidence that learning has taken place and, if the assessment has been structured to focus upon the application of learning, provides the employer with enhanced evaluation of the effectiveness of their training and thus on the return on investment (Pearson and Helyer, 2011).

Accreditation of employer-led learning is an important tool in the development of work-based learning partnerships between universities and employers as it explicitly recognises high level learning which the employer has already developed. Such learning will have been specifically geared to meet the business needs of the employer rather than following the preconceived knowledge structures of the university (Garnett, 2009). A simple model of the use of accreditation of employer training followed by a work-based project focused upon the implementation of the learning from the training programme to achieve a forty to sixty credit point university qualification is shown in Figure 3 (see page 10).

**FIGURE 2: WBL - Building on individual learning**



## 02.

**TABLE 1: Kayley plans her route to an honours degree**

Kayley is a database manager/stock controller of a branch of a major retailer and wishes to establish whether her work-based learning could gain her entry or even possibly advanced standing to a work-based learning degree programme.

She first registers for a Level 4 Learning Review module. This takes one semester, and the results of the module are encouraging as Kayley has identified, described and provided evidence for a number of areas of work-based learning. She gains 110 credit points at Level 4 and 80 credit points at Level 5.

As Kayley now knows that her work-based learning to date is worth academic credit at higher education level she decides to design a programme of study leading to an honours degree. In order to design this programme, she takes a Level 5 Planning Personal and Professional Development module in Semester 2.

The outcome of the programme planning process is that Kayley successfully negotiates a programme of study which incorporates all of her accredited learning and 20 credit points from the Learning Review and the Planning Personal and Professional Development modules to count towards the 360 credit points required for an Honours Degree.

The agreed programme includes the Designing Practitioner Research module.

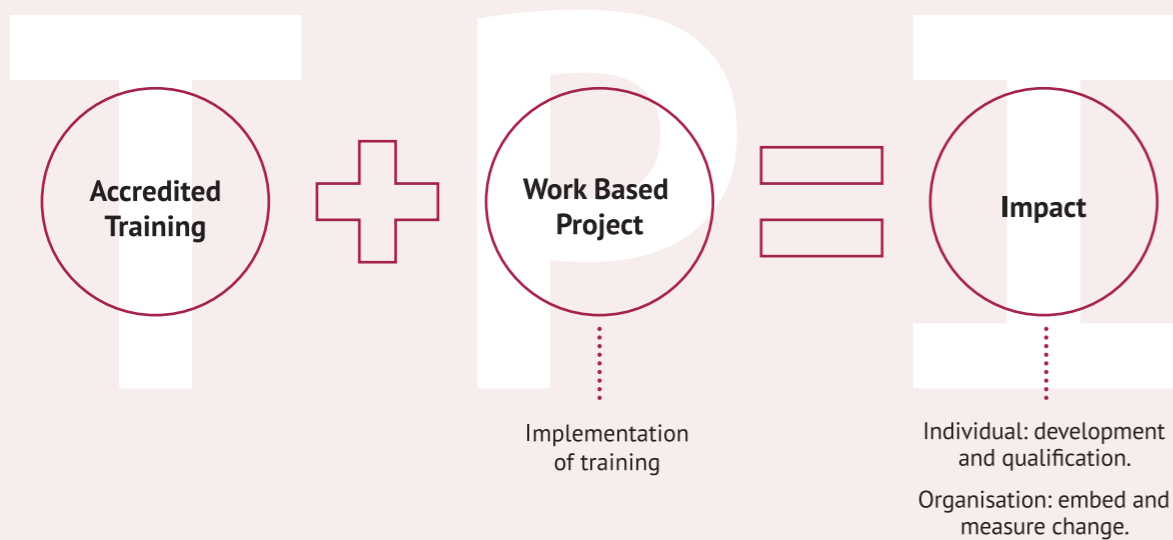
She takes two negotiated learning modules to enhance her knowledge of leadership and management and will then go on to take two 40 credit work based project modules, in each of the subsequent semesters, to achieve the credit points she needs for this degree, BA (Hons) Professional Practice in Retail Management.

**TABLE 2: The use of academic credit to enable a programme of study building upon credit for learning from experience**

Semester	Module	Credit value	Credit level
1	Learning Review	10	4
	Additional credit awarded for learning from experience	110 80	4 5
2	Planning Personal and Professional Development	10	5
3	Negotiated Learning module	30	5
4	Designing Practitioner Research	20	6
4	Negotiated Learning module	20	6
5	Work Based Project 1	40	6
6	Work Based Project 2	40	6
360 credits of which	120 @ L4		
	120 @ L5		
	120 @ L6		

## 02.

**FIGURE 3:** Model of accredited training reinforced by project learning to lead to a university award



### Degree apprenticeships and the integration of work and learning

At the outset of the implementation of a reformed apprenticeship agenda Anderson, Bravenboer and Hemsworth (2012) argued strongly for a significant role for universities in the development and delivery of higher apprenticeships due to their substantial track record in professional work-based learning. Degree apprenticeships were first introduced in 2015 and combined the apprenticeship with the opportunity to gain an honours degree or postgraduate qualification. All apprentices are in employment and thus combine paid work with demonstrating that they have met the relevant employer defined occupational standard. Apprenticeships have long been seen by successive UK governments as a way of addressing a national skills shortage (Saraswat, 2016, p. 402). The rationale for the introduction in 2017 of an employer levy to pay the tuition costs of apprenticeships explicitly required employers to invest in higher level skills and workforce development in order to address “a major barrier to enhancing UK productivity” (Bravenboer, 2016, p. 385). Degree apprenticeships represent a key area for growth for UK higher education institutions.

The need to integrate off-and-on-the-job learning is recognised as essential in the apprenticeship literature (Hughes and Saieva, 2019; Lillis and Bravenboer, 2020). Rowe et al., (2017) placed emphasis upon employer involvement to facilitate learning in and for the workplace and to secure organisational benefits from the degree apprenticeship. Much of the discussion of employer support focuses upon learning from work from peers (Farnsworth et al., 2016) and the importance of a workplace mentor (Roberts et al., 2019).

Pazur et al., (2025) argue that meaningful assessment and feedback, which are key principles of effective teaching and learning in higher education, are more challenging where employer partners are involved. Employer feedback was seen as particularly valued as it provided work context expertise and gave a “real-world” perspective.

## 02.



### Enhancing the application of learning to work to achieve organisational change

In the context of work-based learning as part of a higher education programme the emphasis on the individual learner as a student of the higher education institution can detract from the work context and work priorities. Ions and Minton examined the link between a higher education work-based learning programme and organisational learning and concluded that “the results suggest that consideration should be given to embedding organisational learning principles into the design of work-based learning programmes at higher education level” (Ions and Minton, 2012, p. 30).

Abraham (2015, p. 2025) introduced the concept of “Work-Applied Learning” which is designed to bring about organisational change through a fusion of action research and action learning. A typical work-applied learning programme comprises a number of action research cycles. Each action research cycle consists of meetings of the action research group (normally leaders or managers within the organisation tasked with bringing about change), knowledge workshops/webinars, work-based application and testing of knowledge, joint observations and reflections and monitoring and evaluation. Each member of the action research group leads change projects within their own teams which in turn contribute to the overall organisational change project. Conceptual knowledge on action research and action learning is provided to the group in order to support the change process. Normally, validation of the work-applied learning programme takes place after two full action research cycles have been completed. The validation process is carried out at a meeting of the action research group with top level stakeholders within the organization (often CEO, Human Resource Director, Board members and possibly senior external stakeholders. Zuber-Skerritt and Abraham (2017, p. 39) describe work-applied learning as a “systematic and systemic model” that “seeks to maximise the organisational and personal benefits of a cyclical work-applied learning experience for managers”. Work-applied learning thus draws upon and extends not only the learning of individuals but also the capabilities of teams within an employer organisation and professional area in order to achieve impact at work and thus enhance the intellectual capital of the work organisation.

Rowe et al., (2020, p. 788) report that the degree apprenticeship has raised new expectations of higher education from the apprentices and their employers which is in turn “provoking uncertainty and ambiguity over the purpose and identity of the academic role”. Horackova et al., (2024, p. 634) stress the importance of the regular tripartite review, required as a condition of apprenticeship funding, to prevent “misalignment of expectations across the university and workplace settings”. Garnett and Reynier (2024) stress the importance of employer support to help design and champion work-based projects as well as open up access for the apprentice to different departments and individuals within the organisation.

Lester (2020, p. 707) reported that over fifty percent of employers surveyed did not think that degree apprenticeships had contributed greatly to the employer organisation and “struggled to provide relevant examples”. This view is reinforced by Quew-Jones and Rowe (2022, p. 251) who conclude the “contribution to intellectual and structural capital are not always entirely explicit”. In contrast Garnett and Reynier (2024) highlighted the benefits identified by apprentices and employers of work-based projects, at all higher education levels, addressing real work issues.

# Conclusion

The work-based, work-integrated and work-applied learning experience to date suggests that higher education can play an important role not just in recognising but also in the development and implementation of the curriculum in the workplace. Higher education institutions have the authority and the tools to identify high level learning developed through work and, by using the currency of academic credit, individuals prior learning and formal employed based learning can be given an academic value and used as building blocks within a programme leading to a higher education award. This proves it is enhanced if the higher education institution is willing to take a “general credit” approach to accreditation and has flexible programme structures that allow for customisation at the level of the individual or group of learners in a specific work role or occupational context. Traditional subject knowledge still has a role to play but the apprenticeship experience particularly highlights that it is the application of subject based knowledge to address real-life work issues that is imperative from the point of view of the apprentices and their employers. Specific practitioner research and work-based project modules are important tools in facilitating the application of knowledge in the workplace and the creation of new knowledge which is work-based. Higher education can further enhance learning through, at and for work through facilitating the understanding of work as a context for learning and the role of critical reflection and the informed use of critical evaluation in the learning process. As change in the nature of work in an ever more complex world gathers yet further momentum the lasting value of higher education may be in graduates who can apply higher education level critical thinking to be more effective work-based and life-long learners.

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