

## Evidence based Practice Seminar Series 2010: Assessment and Feedback

### Submission Date

Please submit the completed briefing paper to [clare.gash@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:clare.gash@heacademy.ac.uk) within two months of delivering the seminar.

### Aims & Outputs

Please consider the following when completing your briefing paper:

The aims of the Briefing Paper are to:

- Summarise the key issues presented at the seminar, including the implications of research/evaluation evidence for practice.
- Stimulate discussion, share practice and support the sector's access to relevant research/evaluation evidence.

The briefing paper is designed to accommodate the following types of seminar:

- Those describing findings from research or evaluation projects (either completed or in-progress) and their implications for practice;
- Those describing the application of research and/or evaluation evidence to practice

The Briefing Paper Template on pages 2-4 outlines the basic requirements for the briefing paper and is meant to assist host institutions in summarising the seminar outcomes and also enable a consistent approach across the seminar series.

If you wish to provide any suggestions for how the template might be improved please email [clare.gash@heacademy.ac.uk](mailto:clare.gash@heacademy.ac.uk)

Please note the briefing paper will be disseminated through the Academy's EvidenceNet service. For further details on this service please visit the below web link: <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/evidencenet>



**1. Background information**

Seminar Title:	<b>Employer Engagement and Development of Skills for Employability</b>
Institution(s):	<b>The Open University Practice Based Professional Learning Centre of Excellence for Teaching and Learning</b>
Author(s):	<b>Jan Brunwin, Ingrid Nix, Sue Parr and Mary Thorpe</b>
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**2. Abstract:** Please provide a brief abstract of the seminar delivered (maximum 200 words).

The aims of the seminar were to explore the challenges and opportunities for effective learning in the workplace, from two perspectives: employer engagement in the business context, and ICT and information literacy skills development for social workers. Presenters from the OU Centre for Professional Learning and Development introduced two employer/OU programmes as case studies for discussion of the issues. This was followed by a presentation of findings from OU research into how social workers approach ICT skills, during their social work degree and from the perspective of practice once they have graduated. Findings demonstrated how the work context influenced development of ICT skills and the growing importance of information literacy for social workers. The workshop participants selected either Business or Social Work as their focus for group discussions after the presentations. The plenary session encouraged shared review of the issues. The seminar presented learner perceptions and invited discussion of issues experienced at other institutions. It explored debates within the sector on how best to meet the varied needs of employees, whether managers or practitioners in the social work context, The challenges for HEIs included the time pressures on both employees and academics in developing programmes that satisfy the individual and their employer.

**3. Rationale:** Please provide the background context, such as the research/evidence-informed practice context, which provided the impetus for the seminar.

The workshop drew on projects undertaken independently in two discipline areas: Business and Social Work. The presentations drew upon enquiries funded by the OU Practice-Based Professional Learning CETL, whose remit is learning from work and professional practice. The focus for Business was employer engagement and for Social Work, it was employee skills. The issues and research arising in each area are dealt with under each heading.

**Business:**

The OU Centre for Professional Learning and Development (CPLD) is engaged with a number of employers in developing joint projects, fully funded by employers. The seminar showcased evidence from two projects in the field of Business and Management learning:-



**The J'uMP programme with the Airbus Academy-** where the Open University contributes to an industry based programme to prepare and support the most talented of new graduate managers on a General Management Career path. A partnership that has survived and evolved through a number of iterations and is now in the fifth year of operation.

**The Clinical Leadership Programme-** a relatively new project with the British Medical Journal- the development of an innovative continuing professional development programme comprising flexible, on-line modules with formative, work-based assessment modules leading to a post graduate certificate.

### **Social Work**

The effectiveness of social work qualification programmes is an enduring debate. The last large scale enquiry to address this was undertaken in 1996 by Marsh and Tresiliotis. The *Prepared for practice* research project aimed to build on their approach to research the effectiveness of the Open University (OU) social work degree in preparing students for practice. As the only UK-wide social work degree programme it is uniquely placed to offer evidence of the needs of practitioners nationwide across a range of practice settings.

Universities have used different approaches to address the skills competencies required for the social work degrees by the care councils in Wales, Scotland and England. Until recently the care councils stipulated that students achieve European Computing Driving Licence (ECDL) equivalent ICT skills. Whilst some institutions (including the OU) have integrated ICT skills development within the social work degree, others require students to undertake a separate module to achieve the ECDL certificate, thus treating ICT skills development as a separate undertaking to their social work studies. In 2009 modifications were made to the England care council requirements, removing the need for ECDL equivalent skills and instead including the role of blended learning in preparing students for study and practice skills. Blended learning, which includes e-learning, forms part of the core delivery of the OU social work degree.

This seminar provided an opportunity to explore evidence from two research projects whose findings provide insights into and evaluations of the approaches taken on the OU social work degree:

- the PBPL CETL funded *Prepared for practice* research project, providing evidence of learner perceptions of how effectively Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Information literacy skills (IL) development on the degree had prepared them for the skills needed in social work practice
- the JISC funded *PB-LXP* project, providing evidence about how learners approach ICT and IL in the context of their work and social lives, as well as course study.

The context for presenting the data took account of the fact that OU students typically are already working in practice, bringing experience and expectations of practice, sponsored by their employer, mature students, many lacking experience of ICT, and located in varied geographical and work settings and roles.



**4. Generation of Evidence:** Please describe how the reported research/evaluation findings were generated e.g. methods used

**Business:**

Researchers used an action research approach, collecting data during their day to day work as both managers and teachers on the projects, during both the design and delivery of the programmes, including the initial negotiations and subsequent iterations, from a variety of stakeholders including participant learners, their individual managers, their employers and their tutors as well as the input from CPLD colleagues.

**Social Work:**

Evidence of student perceptions of their learning experiences and preparedness for practice was generated by:

- An online survey activity offered to Social work students during the final year practice learning course of the OU social work degree (providing data from 2008 and 2009 cohorts)
- Data generated by the JISC PB-LXP project including qualitative data from telephone interviews with students and tutors on the Level One practice learning course.
- Data generated by the *Prepared for practice* research project including an online questionnaire undertaken by 33 volunteer graduates in 2008, and Semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 volunteer graduates in 2008 (audio recorded and transcribed).

**5. Related key terms and concepts:** Please list up to 5 key words which closely describe the topic of the seminar. These will facilitate the search functionality used by the Academy's EvidenceNet services.

Employer engagement  
information literacy  
ICT skills  
Professional development  
Work-based learning



**6. Existing Evidence:** Please provide details of research/evaluation evidence drawn on and reported in the seminar

#### ***Business***

The research presented highlighted tensions between the three main stakeholders, summarised below:

#### **Employer perspective in working with HEIs**

- Learning not the main focus of their activities
- Will change priorities quickly to match business imperatives
- May have unrealistic expectations of what university learning can achieve
- Personnel involved will change
- Have useful resources- knowledge/documents/procedures/practice
- Can contribute to teaching (wikis, blogs, forums etc.)
- Often have a suspicion of “academia”/ivory tower image
- Require learning to have immediate relevance to business priorities
- Sometimes like the kudos of links with HE
- May use education as a motivator for staff
- Need a competent workforce above all
- May be interested in organisational knowledge capture

#### **Employee stakeholder perspective:**

- Seeking relevant learning for employment/profession
- Sometimes want to achieve qualifications, but not always main motivator.
- May have a fear of academia
- Expect support from employer and HEI
- May be motivated by personal career expectations
- Motivation is complex/varies between students on same course
- Learning approaches vary between students
- Educational history is important in shaping their approach to HEIs
- Expect effective, joined up learning (most likely to be inter-disciplinary?)
- Are extremely time-poor in comparison to full-time students

#### **HEIs, working with employers and employees, experience these difficulties:**

- Expecting, negotiating and managing the interest and support of employer/sponsor, sometimes over-estimating the level of this engagement
- Managing costs when developing new ways of working
- Moving swiftly in course design and development and validation of new awards
- “It doesn’t fit”: HE standards don’t historically relate to work based learning
- Reconciling “one-size fits all” approach to assessment and qualifications with demands for individual learning tailored to employee.
- Understanding employee learners as co-learners with academic teachers
- Recognising the HEI role as part of a richer learning picture: communities of practice

#### ***Social Work***

The previous work of Marsh and Tresiliotis was the basis for new research.



**7. Research findings/New Evidence:** Please describe any new findings or evidence reported in the seminar.

***Business***

There were no new findings presented for this area.

***Social Work***

The seminar presented learner perceptions derived from two research projects from the first cohorts of the OU social work degree. It presented the skills strategy developed for ICT and IL and how this was integrated into the three practice learning courses on the Social work degree. Examples were presented of different activity types across the three levels to contextualize the findings of the data. Discussion of issues experienced at other institutions were invited, and debates within the education sector on how best to meet the varied needs of social work students and practitioners to adequately develop ICT and IL skills, and keep abreast of changing and emerging practice needs.

Findings related to:

- Level One student views of e-learning including specific e-learning tools and activities
- Level Three student views of particular learning activities including ICT and IL
- Graduate views of their experiences of particular learning activities
- Graduate examples of skills used in their current practice

In summary:

Learners gained increased confidence in using ICT, even when they started out already proficient, through the regular practice of skills on the degree and through the range of applications required, some of which were new. Some learners at Level One and Level Three commented on the positive role the computer now played in their lives and in their practice.

However, motivation during studies was affected by lack of reward eg low marks awarded for skills work, and during work was affected by poorly designed, ineffective computing systems taking up additional time.

Students responded differently to activities depending on their skills level and the requirements of their practice settings, finding some activities more useful and relevant than others. Where assessment stipulated engagement some students resented this when it increased their workload and was not relevant to their practice. Some students commented positively that the driver of assessment motivated them to attempt skills they would otherwise have skipped, subsequently encouraging them to extend their skills further eg to use Facebook and other social networking sites, thus bringing wider benefits.



Time-saving techniques were valued both in ICT and IL, with ease of use and usefulness being key to their usage, and when used for the duration of their studies across the degree programme.

Open-ended IL activities which enabled the learner to fit the context of their practice requirements into the activity were more widely perceived as relevant, compared with ICT activities which targeted specific software applications which were not always relevant.

IL activities appear to be perceived as becoming more relevant for study than previously, and possibly outweighing ICT skills, perhaps as ICT skills become more generally assumed.

In terms of practice skills:

Students and graduates recognised the essential role of ICT in practice (the sample of 12 graduates spent 50-70% of their time on average at a PC).

Some graduates have taken proactive roles to improve and shape practices around the use of ICT in their work settings, volunteering to work on improving computing system designs and supporting colleagues, evidence of practice criticality being applied in this area of their practice.

Some students willingly spent more time at a computer, motivated by fear and anxiety about themselves or colleagues mistakenly failing to input information accurately into the system, reflecting pressures resulting from recent case incidents, such as Victoria Climbié.

Graduates who started the degree less confident in ICT commented that they now feel prepared to have a go, knowing where to look, confident they can cope, the fear has been taken out of it.

Graduates gave creative examples of their use of technologies to support service users in making decisions, using search skills to locate information on topics ranging from health to domestic violence and its effect on children. They commented on the transformational impact this had on their own confidence in handling challenging situations but also on the role this played in providing choices to service users and their carers.

Examples were given of using ICT to improve interactions and communication, e.g using mobile text messaging for a mother with learning difficulties or with hearing difficulties; encouraging regular visitors to an agency website offering drug and alcohol support by providing additional links to local social and music events.

Graduates also gave examples of where they felt it inappropriate to use technologies, such as using PDAs to type assessment data in front of service users.

## 8. Outcomes of research /evaluation evidence and the implications for policy and practice:

Please identify any application or outcomes of research/evaluation evidence and detail the



implications for policy and practice for different stakeholder groups such as: academics, learning technology practitioners, professional developers, senior managers, policy makers, students, sector organisations, employers and professional bodies.

### **Business**

Outcomes For Academic staff:

- a) On going relationships with employers need careful maintenance and are subject to frequent changes in personnel. This takes time that must be factored into academic time-tables.
- b) Valuing and engaging with work-based learning with employers as equal partners is crucial to effective joint working.
- c) The role of the University tutor/lecturer may need reviewing. There is a need for skilled facilitators of learning (some use the word coach- but this is a contested term) rather than simply tutors with subject expertise.

### **Outcomes for HE Institutions**

- a) Employers will not adapt to HE systems. They see HEIs as a service provider and expect service that suits them, the customer, in terms of responsiveness. This has implications for all sorts of University systems from student registration software, and fee payments through to the flexibility built into courses and programmes in terms of pace of study, assessments etc.

### **Social Work**

- Information literacy skills appear to be becoming increasingly useful and valued by practitioners, for informing decision-making with colleagues and services users. While some practitioners perceive they perform effectively using simple search skills, others are increasingly using advanced and detailed searches to identify relevant information. Skills development activities need to take into account these differing skills needs to motivate engagement and address particular practice area requirements.
- Graduates revealed that knowing they possessed the skills to research issues in advance of challenging meetings helped to increase their confidence to face and deal effectively with such challenges. Practitioners need support from management to undertake research, allowing adequate time set aside for this. The potential benefits and contribution of information literacy skills therefore need to be promoted within social work management. Powerful examples given by students/practitioners may help with this.
- As confidence in ICT skills increases alongside criticality in practice, practitioners appear to be evaluating and critiquing the practices around the use of technologies, including administrative systems and tasks, but also indicating creative ideas for how to enhance their practice both by using and in some cases by not using technologies. This is a time potentially to explore collaborations between system designers and expert social work practitioners to inform improvements to such systems.

Managers could be encouraged to be receptive to new ideas for the use of technologies in practice. Some employing organisations in effect discourage use of



the Web by policies on firewalls and access to external sites.

**11. Emerging themes:** Please detail the discussion topics or themes that were raised by delegates during the course of the seminar - suggesting areas that would merit further investigation.

***Business***

In discussion delegates added their own experiences and shared ideas. From these the following emerged:

- a) Establishing a common language with employers is crucial. Academic jargon will not do. It is important to use employers' terms. Thus Learning outcomes used widely in Educational jargon, need to become simply "objectives", for example.
- b) The importance of alumni and how to leverage their potential on-going contribution to the HEI. This can be as ambassadors in their industry sector, but also as a source of information and intelligence for the University as to what is happening in the industry, as well as contributing to teaching, supporting work-place placements etc. They are a vital resource that is often under used.
- c) Working with employers throws some aspects of traditional course design into question. How can we ensure the progression and coherence of a learning programme when demand from employers and their employees is for flexible, bespoke, relevant learning? For example, an HE award may include a flexible modular study pattern, but one which includes some courses that are linked to pre-requisite courses. An employer may want staff to complete a particular module as it is exactly what staff need, without completion of the pre-requisite course. This is compounded by current HEFCE and other stake-holders' interest in outputs- numbers obtaining a qualification i.e. completing a course with successful assessment leading to an award, rather than identifying outcomes which interest the employer/employee i.e. a demand for relevant learning as a priority.
- d) Many employees and their employers prefer learning in short, sharp chunks, which in the end they may or may not want to stitch into an award. They often just want to do part of a course. This challenges current HEI focus on accredited awards as the only valued outcome for students, and therefore on which HEI systems are predicated.
- e) Many HEIs are currently experimenting with "open-box" awards- enabling students to bring prior, often work-based learning to the award and devising appropriate assessment. There were mixed reports of success for this model, and further research into the effectiveness of this as a vehicle for professional, employment-based learning is required.
- f) Enabling university tutors/lecturers to develop appropriate skills for employer engagement will require investment in effective staff development and further research into the best ways of achieving this. .
- g) Employer engagement requires different approaches in different sectors of the economy. Although funding is most likely from major employers, SMEs



are an important sector of the UK economy and we need to identify ways of engaging with them, including leveraging funding.

- h) HEIs cannot take for granted employers understanding of the potential benefits for them in engaging with the University. We need to constantly spell out and finesse those benefits in language the employer relates to.

### **Social Work**

Participants were invited to discuss what the perceived challenges or barriers were in supporting students in developing relevant ICT and IL skills, and invited to suggest ways to overcome them.

#### Information literacy

- Top-down policies constrain access to websites: many social work organizations allow only limited access to online resources, thus preventing research from taking place. Need to explore how wider access can be provided.
- Alumni access to journals needs to be maintained: students often lose access to library journals and databases upon graduation. Need to explore how Libraries could support on-going access (license costs involved) and how the sector might create/maintain portals providing access to resources.
- Need to identify Masters level IL requirements: what skills should be addressed?
- Need to explore relationship between information literacy skills and exerting 'power': When students indicate they are using research to help inform service users with 'balanced views' of the situation, are they truly 'balanced' views? What 'power' is the practitioner exerting? What 'authority' are they bringing to bear? We need to develop students' sensitivity to this issue and their skills in being able to evaluate and appraise information adequately.

#### ICT skills

- Need to develop creative use in practice: It would be helpful to gather and share within the sector examples of social work practice where technologies are used creatively with service users. Instead of us trying to directly share such examples of practice with employers, it may be more effective to try to influence students/practitioners, and encourage them to shape practices within their own organisations.
- In order to ensure activities are perceived to be as widely relevant as possible, they should attempt not to be specific to particular applications or uses. However, the disadvantage is that this makes the activity less supportive for weaker students. To support these students more specific, optional activities with detailed guidance could be offered.
- Ethical dilemmas in using ICT seem to be under-explored and need more attention and scrutiny by students and practitioners.
- The skills to work with blended learning may become skills that we can assume of students coming onto social work degrees in the near future. However, social networking tools and other emerging technologies are bringing their own issues such as how a social work practitioner portrays



their personal/private identity versus their professional identity online.

**12. Any other comments:** Please use this box to include any additional details.

**None**

**13. Bibliography/references (preferably annotated):** Please list any references mentioned in or associated with the seminar topic. Where possible, please annotate the list to enable readers to identify the most relevant materials.

**Business**

Jere Brophy (ed) *Social Constructivist teaching: affordances and constraints* Jai, Amsterdam 2002

David Boud, Peter Cressey and Peter Docherty (eds) *Productive Reflection at Work- learning for changing organisations* Routledge, London 2006

M. Eraut *Informal Learning in the workplace*. Studies in Continuing Education 26(2) pp247-273 2004

Meryl Hammond and Rob Collins *Self -directed learning* Kogan Page, London 1991

Peter Reason & Hilary Bradbury (eds) *Handbook of action research: participative inquiry and practice* London Sage 2001

Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave *Situated Learning: legitimate peripheral participation* Cambridge University Press 1991

Etienne Wenger *Communities of Practice: learning, meaning and identity* Cambridge University Press 1999

**Social Work**

Marsh, P. & Tresiliotis, J. (1996) *Ready to practice? Social workers and probation officers: Their training and first year in work*, Avebury, Aldershot

For further information on the *Prepared for practice* project see:



<http://www.open.ac.uk/pbpl/activities/details/detail.php?itemId=499c305d56f6d>

For further information on the PB-LXP project see:

<http://tiny.cc/PBLXP>

