Abstract: Research and development carried out at the Centre for Outcomes-Based Education, has provided new ways of enabling students at the Open University to be accredited at higher education level for their learning in the workplace and their prior experiential learning. One of our approaches to the assessment of work-based learning involves recognising the learning that has taken place in National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 3 qualifications, such as National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ), and enabling students to achieve 30 credits at higher education level through specially designed assessment.

The assessment strategy is based on the mapping of learning outcomes from relevant NQF level 3 qualifications onto the generic learning outcomes for 30 credits of work-based learning at higher education level. When this process has been completed, the unmapped learning outcomes can be identified and the assessment strategy can be developed to ensure that students qualify for the full 30 credits at HE level 1. This route into undergraduate study was developed following our research into various employment sectors which highlighted a need to build a pathway between sub-HE and HE learning as a way of encouraging widening participation at university level.

Built into this assessment strategy is a support strand which guides students through their studies so that they are well placed to successfully complete this ‘conversion’ course. Successful completion will enable the individual to be confident about their own skills both in the workplace and at their ability to study at higher education level. This learning and teaching strategy is based on the theory of self-efficacy put forward by theorists such as Dweck, 1999; and Bandura, 1997. Students who have completed this course will therefore be in a good position to further their studies at this higher level.

Keywords: widening participation, work-based learning, assessment, learning outcomes, sub-HE recognition, employment sectors

Introduction

Work-based learning is currently being seen as an important initiative in higher education in relation to the Government’s White Paper on the Future of Higher Education (2003), foundation degrees and widening participation. Work-based learning also has a part to play in relation to social justice (Avis, 2005) and widening participation. Work-based learning developments in the Centre for Outcomes-Based Education, at the Open University involve knowledge processes in three key areas: workplace activities, learning materials and reflective assignments. These three areas relate to generic, specific and academic knowledge in terms of applying academic knowledge to occupational situations and have an assessment strategy which enables students to gain credit at higher education level.
The distance learning framework developed in COBE for the delivery of work-based learning can be used within a wide variety of workplaces and has been designed to need minimal input from employers. Whilst this is an advantage in terms of time and financial costs to both employers and universities, and the individual learner (Arthur and Tait, 2005) it is recognised that many vocational groups use an NVQ level 3 as a ‘licence to practice’ because it involves elements of face-to-face observation and assessment. Further, this type of award requires a deliberate, yet light touch input from the workplace, some supervisory and/or line management guidance and the opportunity to experience activities in areas of the workplace where the student would not normally operate, and this, in turn, promotes a sound learning environment (Billett, 2005). Whilst it is acknowledged that higher education and work settings do not have the same ‘knowledge cultures’ (Eraut, 2004), this conversion course attempts to link these two learning opportunities into one learning pathway. We therefore proposed that this qualification can also be used as the practical component of a work-based learning course for a range of HE programmes; such as, foundation degrees, honours degrees, certificates or diplomas. In order to enable students to gain 30 HE credits at level 1, a generic assessment strategy, which acts as an “academic wrap-around” for NVQ level 3 qualifications, has been developed.

**Higher Education assessment strategy for NVQ Level 3 awards**

Our assessment strategy enables students who have completed an NVQ level 3 to gain 30 credit points at HE level 1. This strategy puts the student directly at the centre of the learning experience and from this perspective broadens the focus on the experience of learning (Entwisle and Ramsden, 1983). In developing the assessment we have taken account of the need to support the needs of the student rather than frustrate them with additional “layers of learning” (Broadfoot and Black, 2004). We also recognise that all systems of assessment influence the types of capital contained within them (Ecclestone, 2004). The strategy consists of academic assessment based on the students’ reflective accounts of their NVQ experience. It also encourages students to take ownership of, and invest in their own continuing development and recognise the inherent value of their own training (Rainbird, 2002), as they will be able to build up their knowledge from a firm base of practical experience. Students are introduced to relevant academic theories by means of a structured study guide which presents different theoretical viewpoints on aspects of their occupational experience gained from achieving the NVQ award. The structure of this assessment is clearly signposted so that students are given adequate guidance on how this should be completed.

The supported open learning offered by the Open University enables students to move from the personal perspective of their NVQ learning, where the experience of the subject matter the student has gained is directly relevant (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994), to the appreciation of how academic theory can be used to broaden the knowledge and understanding of different subject areas. In order to support students further, the first tutor marked assessment is a formative piece of work that sets out the structure for attempting the academic assignment. This gives the student a safety net and helps focus in on the actual learning that is taking place. This formative assessment is a key component and it has been developed as a means of motivating those studying the course to reach a higher educational goal (Ecclestone and Pryor, 2002). The potential of formative assessment to promote learning is also stressed by Knight and Yorke (2003).

Support is provided by a range of academic texts and learning materials, as well as a tutor who will supply feedback on this first assignment so that individual students can make sure they are on the right track, and fully understand how they should complete and submit the final piece of assessment. Students will be basing their learning on their prior experience of gaining a vocational qualification and this should help promote a high level of self-motivation as they will already have experience on this vocational topic (Talbot, 2003). This is a pass/fail scenario with 30 credit points awarded at HE level 1 in the result of a pass.
Maintaining Quality Assurance

For each subject area, a selection of NVQ level 3 awards is chosen and quality assured. This avoids using limited resources to assess each individual student’s NVQ award. Prospective students are given information about which NVQ level 3 awards are applicable for each conversion course. Whilst the general support material and approach is the same, each conversion course has its own examples of relevant theoretical models according to the occupational and discipline area it covers e.g. management, ICT, social care. It is useful, in this case, to view a completed NVQ level 3 as a container of work experience that has been quality assured and that can be exploited in a different context.

In considering the level of learning achieved with an NVQ level 3 award, other NQF awards may be relevant for this type of sub-HE into HE conversion course. In investigating the possibility of utilising other equivalent vocational awards it is important to be assured that the learning can be both quantified and qualified, in other words adequately evaluated, so that the quality of the final higher education credit gained can be assured both in terms of academic credibility and the personal achievement of the student.

Learning and teaching strategy

The learning and teaching strategy for this conversion course is based on Dweck’s self theories which propose that individuals position themselves within two possible frameworks for perceiving intelligence and achievements. One framework relies on entity theory and from this viewpoint intelligence is fixed and cannot be changed. The second framework relies on the incremental theory and from this viewpoint intelligence is malleable and can be changed. Students who take the NVQ or vocational route to learning have often had early experiences of learning which have been unsuccessful and demotivating. They choose practical learning routes as a way to demonstrate their learning but this often means they do not have an easy link into higher education study.

The conversion course has been developed to motivate NVQ level 3 students to view their learning using the incremental theory proposed by Dweck. Rather than using entity theory which views intelligence as fixed, those who believe in incremental theory believe that intelligence can be improved by endeavour and learning and this is the viewpoint that we wish to promote. The learning strategy capitalises on the fact that despite possible early learning failures, NVQ students can be recognised as having achieved a defined amount and level of learning within their vocational qualification and that this learning can be built upon to enable students to achieve credit at higher education level 1. If students can be given a positive experience in studying at higher education level, they can be helped to view their learning from the incrementalist perspective. Thus dealing with any perceived learning difficulties they may have had in the past they will begin to believe they can succeed by undertaking more study and in consequence advance their accomplishments.

Dweck’s viewpoint suggests that individuals who have early successes in their learning experiences do not have a guaranteed route to increased confidence in learning situations. In the case of entity theorists the confidence they display in their early learning successes disappears when they have to deal with problems in their later learning experiences. Dweck puts forward the view that incrementalists who begin their learning journey with low confidence achieve more than entity theorists with high confidence when they come across problems in their learning. Entity theorists believe they have problems because they do not have the intelligence to succeed while incrementalists believe that they can keep trying and that in the end they will achieve success in their learning. This view is supported by Knowles theory of andragogy which highlights the fact that adults are ‘self-directed’ and seek to make their own decisions (Atherton, 2003).
It is also recognised that all types of testing have an effect on how students are motivated to learn (Harlen and Deakin Crick, 2003). This can have a positive and negative effect, for some students motivation will increase if there is a “test” to pass, whilst for others motivation may wane, perhaps playing out the scenario of “what if I fail the test”. If we can deconstruct motivation and look at it as a series of parts such as the will to learn, expending effort, setting and achieving a goal and also broadly including an analysis of “the self”, i.e. esteem, efficacy and control. It would seem that Dweck’s incrementalist approach works if the student can have a reasonable amount of control over how they engage with their own learning. (Harlen and Deakin Crick, 2003).

**Workplace knowledge, activities and assessment**

Using the higher education learning outcomes for 30 credits of work-based learning, it has been possible to highlight the areas which need to be covered in the conversion course component (see Figure 1).

*Figure 1 The range of knowledge and activities to be addressed in work-based learning*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HE Learning Outcomes for 30 credits of work-based learning at level 1</th>
<th>NVQ L3 + academic conversion course</th>
<th>Knowledge</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Workplace activities</td>
<td>NVQ L3 qualification</td>
<td>Generic and specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning/support materials</td>
<td>Academic theories (Improving own learning meta skills framework)</td>
<td>Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment strategy</td>
<td>2 TMAs – 1 formative &amp; 1 assessed</td>
<td>Generic, specific and academic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The conversion course aims to enable students to apply their understanding and knowledge of relevant, contextualised, theory within a relevant workplace setting. Referring to the constructivist theory of Bruner (1996), learning is seen as an active rather than passive process which reflects on the construction of new ideas and concepts grounded in current and past experience and knowledge in a social and cultural context. Such a position is also taken by Lave and Wenger (1990) in their viewpoint of situated learning. In our conversion course, students are enabled to develop their skills in exploring the workplace, understanding the organisational structure of the workplace and explaining the type and context of their employer’s organisation. The course aims to give students an informed appreciation of how workplace issues, such as health and safety, regulation and legislation impact on learning within the workplace. It also enables students to critically evaluate their own work context in relation to work-based learning and review their own personal and professional knowledge and skills. Underpinning this approach is the future emphasis for higher education to enable students to learn how to learn and to continue to learn as an independent and self regulating individual (Peters, 2000). Rather than relying on the separatist theory from a practice aspect that is still so prevalent in the classroom (Raelin, 2000), this approach enables the practical experience of individuals to inform the understanding of theoretical perspectives.
Conclusion

This qualification would appeal to a wide audience of prospective Open University (OU) students who wish to parallel their work and study, a traditional trait of OU students and a useful pathway into Higher Education. One could argue that perhaps this route into higher education could only really be fully exploited in traditional vocational areas, such as Social Care and Education. However, the potential exists to apply this learning framework to other vocational related qualifications, for example those used in the armed forces that have an equivalency to an NVQ level 3 in the National Qualifications Framework. Moreover, there are a raft of professional qualifications that may also benefit from this approach, maybe not all could attain 30 higher education credit points, but certainly marrying the reflective approach of work-based experience and the learning methods employed in higher education. As the UK workforce tries to develop and sustain a higher degree of technical competence a three dimensional approach, as set out in figure 1, must be employed in Higher Education to seek to define and recognise achievements in a goal oriented society.

References


Department for Education and Skills (2003), The Future of Higher Education (White Paper)


