Work-based Learning

A baseline study of work-based learning at undergraduate level in Scotland

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Executive summary

This study was carried out by The Open University in Scotland. Working with colleagues from the Work-based Learning (WBL) Forum of the Quality Assurance Agency Scotland (QAA Scotland), a Reference Group was established to guide and to advise on the research process. That group represented six HEIs as well as The Open University in Scotland and the QAA Scotland. The aim of the study was to generate a ‘snapshot’ of WBL provision in Scotland and an overview of the issues raised by those involved. These aims were met as demonstrated in the full report.

All HEIs in Scotland were surveyed in an attempt to gather data about the numbers of students in different areas of study and the trend of those numbers. Simultaneous to that process, twenty interviews were held with twenty-one people who were closely involved with WBL. These ‘stakeholders’ were chosen so as to discern views on a range of WBL issues from the perspectives of HEIs, employers, sector bodies and other relevant organisations. Data from the survey and the interviews were combined in presenting the research findings. The main findings of this study are:

Finding 1: There is a considerable commitment to WBL at all levels within HEIs in Scotland as well as a growing need for formalised WBL among employers and those representing learners.

Findings 2, 3, 6: The strategic position of WBL within HEIs has been difficult to identify. Clarity on this topic is not helped by the lack of an agreed definition of WBL and the frequent conflation of the terms ‘WBL’ and ‘employability’. Employability is widely mentioned by HEIs in this study but the HE sector seems to have no official role in the Employability structures or Economic Recovery strategy of the Scottish Government.

Finding 4: WBL is not separately tagged or reported within HEIs. This may well be symptomatic of an integrated view of WBL as ordinary learning rather than as a different kind of activity. In spite of a view that WBL in HEIs is strategically important to the Scottish Government, there is no driver within an HEI’s funding or reporting systems to record WBL.

Finding 5: In spite of a view that WBL is increasingly important to HEIs, there is little evidence of rising numbers in WBL courses. While WBL is being offered across a wide range of discipline areas, Business and Management Schools are the main HEI players in WBL with Nursing in second place. Considerable WBL development is taking place at levels outwith the scope of this study.

Finding 7: This study found many examples of fruitful and rewarding partnerships in relation to the provision of WBL. The reported challenges of such collaboration included communication difficulties and questions about who should be involved in the assessment of student work and in what roles.

Finding 8: HEI provision is not always the optimal solution for employers or learners. Professional Development Awards are an attractive option in some sectors of the workforce and training providers and employers are increasingly finding ways other than HEI-badging to accredit their in-house provision.
Finding 9: Funding structures were reported as a barrier to development both internally and external to HEIs. The Scottish Funding Council’s (SFC) funding decisions support the Scottish Government’s national priorities but those priorities focus on employability rather than specifically on WBL.

This report goes on to make some recommendations in relation to the outcomes of this study.

Recommendation 1: Place of WBL in national strategy
If WBL is to be supported and developed, the issue of its place in the Scottish Government’s strategic plans must be clearer. This would involve an examination of the structures which currently support employability and the link between this priority and the reporting requirements of HEIs.

Recommendation 2: Funding
Some consideration of – and clarity regarding – what funding systems and structures are involved in developing and delivering WBL would be beneficial in illuminating gaps and overlaps, with a view to facilitating more equitable provision of WBL opportunities across the country.

Recommendation 3: Further research
Future research into WBL provision in HEIs should bear in mind that traditional divisions of courses into discipline areas might not be helpful as a framework for a study and that alternative ways of collecting data might be considered.

Recommendation 4: Focus on post-graduate and post-doctoral developments
Further research into accredited but sub-degree level training and, in particular, into post-graduate WBL would complement the findings of this study.

Recommendation 5: Fractal studies may illuminate the impact of WBL
It may be useful to consider studies of the impact of WBL through fractal analysis of the micro impacts of WBL. Such studies may illuminate the impact of WBL on small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) and, thereby, the medium-to-long term value of WBL to the Scottish economy.
Introduction

The last decade has seen a range of policy statements and interventions relating to the relationship between work and learning (DfES 2003). The thrust of all these policies is to increase economic productivity through a more direct relationship between education and work (Scottish Government 2008). Scotland has a more highly qualified workforce than the rest of the UK, yet its per capita output is lower than that of England. The reasons for this are unclear but one part of the solution is to allow those in employment to use and develop their knowledge and skills – i.e. education for those in employment. The ‘push’ then is workforce development, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) defines it as ‘Learning and organisational activity for those in employment’ (SFC 2010).

This report shares the findings of a small investigation of WBL in Scotland. It sets out the rationale of the study and reports on the quantitative and qualitative data collected. The limitations of the quantitative data in particular are identified, and the report focuses on themes and issues which emerged during the research process. The difficulty faced by respondents in finding and reporting details about courses and student registrations is noted. Data from the semi-structured interviews formed a major part of the information on which this report is based. The findings are therefore most fully reported under the themes and issues which emerged, rather than as concrete data from the survey or interviews. Discussion of those issues is followed by some recommendations for future research work in this area.

This study is part of a wider exploration of WBL in Scotland undertaken by The Open University in Scotland (OuiS) on behalf of the SFC. As part of a scoping of issues and developments in the area of Work-Based Learning (WBL), this study set out to record how HEI-accredited WBL is developed and provided across Scotland. The Higher Education (HE) sector in Scotland comprises 16 universities, an art school, a conservatoire, and Scotland’s Rural College.

Generating a baseline of WBL provision, even within specified parameters, was never going to be
a simple task since there is no agreed definition of what constitutes WBL across the HE sector. WBL is often read as learning at, for or through work (Brennan et al. 2006). This definition covers a range of practices. For that reason the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA Scotland) in Scotland has attempted to clarify and refine WBL as the following practices:

- “Employee-students in vocational areas undertake professional qualifications part time using their work context as a key component of their learning
- Employee-students undertake general degree studies using their work context for learning and assessment
- Workers undertake in-house courses that are then credit-rated towards HEI awards
- Workers undertake programmes deliberately planned to integrate learning and practice” (Ball and Manwaring 2010, p. 4).

The QAA Scotland definition excludes block placements, internships, distance or blended learning, block release or evening classes “not linked to the work context” [see following paragraph]. This study amended that definition and established its own parameters as discussed below.

**Policy context**

Learning, Skills and Well-Being is one of the Scottish Government’s six Strategic Priorities in their Economic Recovery Plan (Scottish Government 2012a). Work-based learning is not specifically mentioned, though the objective to ‘develop a more resilient and adaptable economy’ is congruent with the Government emphasis on employability, a term which was so often used interchangeably with WBL in this study. Employability is used in the ‘Refresh of the Employability Framework’ (Scottish Government 2012b) to mean preparing, for employment, people who are currently out of work [emphasis added]. Policy on supporting those already in work to develop their knowledge and skills is not evident in either the Economic Recovery Plan or in published policies on Employability, in spite of the simple and helpful explanation of employability as being ‘about equipping Scottish residents to fill jobs’ offered by the National Delivery Group recommendations to the Scottish Employability Forum in March 2013 (Scottish Employability Forum 2013).

By contrast, a clear message has been delivered by the Scottish Government (2013) to the NHS about the importance of valuing learning in the workplace. This is being supported as a way of developing the workforce to work within the values of the NHS and to meet the needs of Scotland’s population in the future. ‘Valuing on-the-job learning and recognising the workplace as a major source of learning’ is one of the ways in which the Scottish Government sees its 2020 NHS workforce vision becoming a reality (Scottish Government 2013).

While the Scottish Funding Council has indicated their prioritisation of WBL and employability within HEIs by their funding of projects such as Edinburgh Napier University’s Graduate Employability Project, they – the SFC – do not specifically include WBL or employability in the targets on which Scottish HEIs report. Employability is clearly important within HEI provision but the HE sector seems to have no official role in the Employability Strategy of the Scottish Government, whereas the Further Education (FE) sector is central to the partnerships within that strategy. WBL has a strong heritage and continuing vigour within FE in Scotland’s Colleges. There are indications, such as the Edinburgh Napier project cited above, and the focus within UHI of engaging with local
economies, that the Higher Education sector may be moving towards the flexibility which has enabled FE to develop WBL in the way it has and to establish its place at the centre of the Policy direction of the Scottish Government.

At a broader level, the structures established in Scotland to support employability initiatives suggest a lack of consistency in relation to WBL at a policy level, making it difficult to discern an overarching approach. The Scottish Government wishes to support stakeholders in the development of Employability Partnerships within the broader Community Planning Partnership framework. That Scottish Government support has resulted in a number of national stakeholder-led groups having been established to work together to seek solutions to the challenge of up-skilling Scotland’s workforce. HEIs are not currently part of that infrastructure.

Within the Higher Education sector, there have been efforts to co-ordinate and support work-based learning initiatives across the UK. Specifically, a ‘Work-based Learning Maturity Toolkit’ has been developed by JISC in order to provide a tool for HEIs, or separate departments within HEIs, to identify:

- Appropriate organisational and business approaches toward WBL, including how best to measure impact, costs and benefits
- How to enhance learning, teaching & assessment with WBL pedagogies and use of blended learning techniques
- How to update organisational processes and systems and related support processes
- How to provide a quality experience for staff and students e.g. through training and support services.

In 2012-13, a group of HEIs in Scotland used this tool in an action research project in order to inform the design and implementation of a range of work-based learning initiatives. A community of practice emerged from that project which enhanced existing partnership working, and produced case studies of ways of using the toolkit. One of the recommendations from the project was that the Toolkit should be used as a national guide for WBL, in a similar way to the use of the RPL guidelines from the QAA Scotland.

The integration of reference to WBL into some of the new sections of the QAA Quality Code is an indicator of WBL increasingly being seen as a fundamental element of HE.

Parameters of the study

Work in the area of measuring or even discussing WBL can easily flounder on a debate about its definition. At an early stage in the planning of this study, the question of the competing definitions and understandings of WBL were explored and there was agreement within the Reference Group and the research team that work needed to move beyond that debate. Rather than trying to agree on a definition of the term ‘work-based learning’, a set of parameters for this study were agreed upon and these are presented below in full.

Decisions about the study parameters were informed by the constraints of time and resources as well as by the imperative to plan a viable piece of research. Using the Scottish Credit and
Qualifications (SCQF) Framework as a guide to select areas of work, it was immediately clear that a great deal of WBL is in place, and being further developed, at non HE level. In particular there has been a renewed interest in WBL developments at postgraduate level in Scotland, notably, but not exclusively, the ‘Making the Most of Masters’ (MMM) partnership project. Within the MMM project, WBL has become part of a wide range of Masters level programmes, as students can opt for a work-based placement as part of their study. This project has had an impact on Masters programmes across Scotland, and evidence of the positive effects on graduate employability of such placements is emerging (Green et al. 2012).

Having considered the range of developments and provision, the research team, with the backing of the Reference Group, narrowed the scope of this study to learning which is accredited by an HEI in Scotland at undergraduate level, that is, SCQF levels 7 – 10 inclusive.

Parameters of the Study as agreed by the Reference Group

1 In order for the output of the Work-Based Learning Baseline study to be most useful, it is necessary to be clear about its parameters from the outset. Because of the constraints of time and other resource limitations, this study will collect and present information on work-based learning within the following boundaries, based on the definition of Work-Based Learning presented by the QAA Scotland in Ball and Manwaring (2010).

2 The study will examine work-based learning which is:
   i. context-specific
   ii. accredited by a HEI in Scotland, and
   iii. accredited at undergraduate level, that is, SCQF levels 7 – 10 inclusive.

3 The study will include learning where the focus is on situations where:
   i. the main location for the student learning is the workplace
   ii. the curriculum is jointly designed to meet the needs of both HEI and employer, and
   iii. the immediacy of the work context provides opportunities for the development of reflective personal and career development planning.

4 The following situations will therefore be included in the study:
   i. Students in their own workplace who undertake professional qualifications using their work context as a key component of their learning
   ii. Students in their own workplace who undertake general degree studies using their work context for learning and assessment
   iii. Employees undertaking in-house courses which are then credit-rated towards HEI awards
   iv. Employees undertaking programmes deliberately planned to integrate learning and practice
   v. Block placements as part of an SCQF qualification, such as nursing, social work, occupational therapy and engineering
   vi. Students taking an internship module within industry as part of their degree.

5 The learning situations excluded from the study would include:
   i. postgraduate courses and programmes
   ii. non-accredited learning programmes
   iii. placement or internship modules which are not accredited as part of academic study.
Methodology

There were a number of elements to the methodology in this study and they are considered here in turn.

Reference Group

In line with the intention that this should be a collaborative piece of research across the HE sector in Scotland, a Reference Group was established to guide the study and advise the research team. Membership emerged from the QAA Scotland WBL Forum of those who were particularly interested in this area and who volunteered to be involved. A representative from the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) was then invited to join the group so that it represented perspectives other than those from the Central Belt. UHI is different from other HEIs in that it is based on a network of local colleges who have long been working with their communities to meet the needs of employers – see Figure 7.

Data collection

Contact was established with every HEI in Scotland and an identified person agreed upon to receive and complete a survey about their WBL provision on behalf of the HEI. Once a contact person had agreed to receive the (electronic) survey, this was confirmed in writing along with a description of the study and its parameters. The survey itself contained background information about the study and a link to the document, setting out the parameters. The survey asked about areas in which WBL was offered, student numbers and the trend of those numbers – see Appendix 2. Completing the survey involved considerable internal liaison, time and persistence on the part of the contact person who was, most often, in an academic-related or administrative role.

In order to supplement the survey data and achieve a rounded view of what WBL is happening in Scotland (within the parameters of the study), twenty-one identified ‘stakeholders’ were interviewed (two in a joint interview) and those 20 interviews were recorded and transcribed. The stakeholder respondents were selected because of their role and interest in WBL, from as wide a range of perspectives as was possible within the constraints of the study. Gender and geographical balance were borne in mind when requesting interviews. The interviews were based on a semi-structured questionnaire which was adapted within each interview to be relevant to the interviewee and their context – see Appendix 3 for the interview outline/questionnaire. Interestingly it was much easier to achieve agreement to be interviewed than agreement to complete the survey questionnaire, which is an indicator of the difficulties HEIs faced in trying to collate the data requested by the survey as well as the widespread commitment to WBL across a range of Scottish organisations.

A second, more detailed, survey was designed with a view to collecting information about the level of WBL courses, assessment processes and relationships with partners. Feedback from distribution of the first survey was that respondents had difficulty in finding information about WBL provision within their own HEI. Even where they could find it, they did not immediately need that data and, while they were supportive of the aims of this study, they could not allocate to it the resources which would be required by the second, more detailed, survey. It was therefore agreed not to use this survey other than with the one HEI, UHI, for whom it would produce a relevant and reusable output. A case-study, based on the data from that survey, is included in this report.
Respondents

Having established contacts in all the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Scotland and having secured agreement with each institution to issue the survey to them, a personalised survey link was sent to each of the 19 HEIs in Scotland. Sixteen survey responses were received from 15 institutions.

The survey requests were sent only to HEIs in Scotland (19 in total), in line with the parameters of the study, that is, to examine WBL which is accredited by a HEI in Scotland at undergraduate level, SCQF levels 7 – 10 inclusive. Of the 16 survey returns, two were from the same HEI. This HEI and a further two returned incomplete surveys which were not included in the analysis. The final response rate was 63% (12). Not all the responses are as full as would have been ideal, and this report takes that into account in that it avoids making claims which are not supported by the data.

Those who completed and/or submitted the survey were either in roles described as ‘Academic related’ (38%), ‘Academic’ (25%), ‘Administrative’ (19%) or ‘Management’ (19%). Those who provided information for the UHI case-study were all in academic roles.

For the face-to-face interviews, key stakeholders (Figure 1) were identified who might offer a range of perspectives on WBL in Scotland. The response to requests for interviews was positive and twenty-one people with a range of job roles in relation to WBL were interviewed about WBL provision in their organisation and their views on WBL more widely. Those interviewed included eight respondents from HEIs and one from a research pool within a HEI structure. Six other interviewees responded from an employer perspective; all six of those organisations delivered or approved some education and/or training, and two of those would describe themselves as brokers of education and training. There was some overlap of ‘organisational type’ in the group of interviewees and the range could be broadly described as HEI (9), training or educational provider (3), training or educational broker (2), ‘sector’ body (2), social services provider (1), Health Board (1), private business (1) and awarding and accrediting body (1).

While small in population terms, Scotland is diverse in terms of educational need. Large parts of the country are rural and some have a distinctive local identity, e.g. Shetland. All areas of Scotland have a strong history of commitment to education at all levels. The importance of including data from across Scotland was reflected in the composition of the Reference Group and in the
A notable absence in the survey and interview data is that of responses from the ancient universities. The only interview gained within this group was one with someone whose affiliation was more to an inter-university grouping and she was not responding on behalf of the university in which she was based. Undoubtedly this omission from the survey responses is related to the difficulty reported by all participating HEIs of identifying what WBL is happening within their programmes. That issue is a broader one and is explored further below.

Cover of provision

Reflecting a trend across Higher Education in general, almost 70% of respondents described their work as covering a worldwide audience. Of the eight stakeholders from HEIs who were interviewed, five (63%) described their provision as ‘worldwide’ or ‘global’. Those who responded that their student engagement covered a smaller geographical area were discussing their own area of work, as their Universities do, in fact, have students based across the world.

Limitations

WBL courses do not tend to be categorised separately by HEIs. Modules and programmes are labelled as ‘work-based learning’ or ‘work-place learning’ or ‘work-related learning’ in public information, such as a University prospectus, but the HEI themselves have no way of searching their systems for this information other than by asking the academic staff directly. This resource-intensive method of data extraction must account for much of the difficulty in collecting numerical data, a difficulty which is mirrored in similar attempts at researching WBL provision across the UK.

That WBL is used and understood differently within and between HEIs means that the data collected via the survey must be interpreted with caution. Furthermore, while the response rate of 63% is positive for an electronic survey, not all of those responses are complete.

The stakeholder interviews provided useful data in relation to wider themes and issues but the limitation of their small number and their selection means that the qualitative data must also be interpreted cautiously. While the stakeholders were all invited to be interviewed, self-
selection occurred in those who responded positively to that invitation. Most of those interviewed agreed to be involved because of their commitment to WBL, which raises the question as to the representativeness of their responses.

Because of these limitations to the reliability of the data, this report does not purport to offer a definitive analysis of the state of WBL provision in Scotland, but rather offers comment on some findings and on the issues raised by the study. It is suggested that the issues raised by the research process may be among the most important outcomes of the study.

Findings

The findings of the study are summarised as follows, and discussed in more detail below:

1. There is considerable commitment to WBL at all levels within HEIs in Scotland
2. While WBL is very important to some sections of some HEIs, it does not appear to be a strategic priority for most HEIs
3. There is no universally shared definition of WBL either within or among the stakeholders consulted. Conflation of the terms ‘WBL’ and ‘employability’ was evident within the HEIs consulted
4. HEIs do not separately identify or record their WBL provision as such and have no immediate driver to do so. While WBL appears to be important to the Scottish Government, there is little evidence of that focus in funding or reporting arrangements with HEIs
5. In spite of the reported trend of WBL being increasingly important to HEIs, there is no evidence of a trend of rising numbers on WBL courses. Business and Management Schools are the main HEI contributors to WBL, with Nursing in second place
6. Employability is widely mentioned by HEIs in this study but the HE sector seems to have no official role in the Employability structures or Economic Recovery strategy of the Scottish Government
7. Partnership working in relation to WBL can be fruitful and rewarding. The reported challenges of such collaboration included communication difficulties and questions about who should be involved in the assessment of student work and in what roles
8. Some sectors of the workforce and training providers and employers are increasingly finding ways other than HEI-‘badging’ to accredit their in-house provision
9. Within and external to HEIs, funding structures were reported as a barrier to the development of WBL. The Scottish Funding Council’s (SFC) funding decisions support the Scottish Government’s national priorities, but those priorities focus on employability rather than specifically on WBL.

The findings are discussed as follows under the themes and issues which emerged in an attempt to sketch a picture of WBL activity and related developments across Scotland, rather than to offer narrower slices of non-contextualised data.
Collecting data about numbers of students on WBL courses was problematic for many of the respondents. No HEIs seem to record separately what courses or programmes are considered to be WBL and fewer than half (40%) of the 21 stakeholders who were interviewed reported that the definition of WBL was agreed across their organisation. The lack of an agreed definition of WBL and the apparent absence of a WBL tag in listings of courses made it quite difficult for a number of the survey respondents to identify WBL in the various schools and departments in their university.

The survey asked about student numbers on work-based learning courses in discipline areas. It also asked for a general indication of student numbers and whether they are rising, falling or mostly constant. ‘Business / Management’ was the discipline area where there was most reported WBL activity at undergraduate level, followed by Nursing. Nine HEIs reported student numbers in Business/Management; three reported steady student numbers of between 500 and 1000, with one HEI having more than 1000 students and reporting that number to be rising (Figure 3). Nursing showed the next highest level of WBL activity.

Most Nurse Education programmes taught more than 500 students in any one year, with four of those teaching in excess of 1000 students each (Figure 4). The student numbers on those courses varied fairly evenly between holding constant (3), rising (2) and falling (2).

Five HEIs reported WBL activity in Engineering and Technology, with varying levels of student numbers and trends, two staying constant, two rising and one falling (Figure 5). Figures from other subject areas are illustrated in charts in Appendix 4. Those data sets show that it was not possible to obtain sufficient data in music, drama and the arts to form a view about numbers or trends in that discipline area. However, in spite of some gaps in the data available, it is clear that WBL occurs across all discipline areas and this breadth of provision may reflect an integration of WBL into the wider curriculum, making distinctions between what is and is not WBL less meaningful.
### Business/Management

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Figure 3  Business / Management student numbers and trends

### Nursing

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Figure 4  Nursing student numbers and trends
When HEIs provided information on subject areas not in the list of options ('other'), they included some WBL modules which were run across discipline areas. University-wide and cross-faculty modules were also reported in some of the stakeholder interviews, for example the University of Dundee Careers Service offers an Internship Module which consists of a placement with an employer or organisation for a total of 30 hours throughout the semester, and group tuition in the form of 10 weekly 2-hour seminars.

The presentation of the data gathered in this study suggests a view of WBL in HEIs which is embedded in the curriculum of most discipline areas in many HEIs. That those HEIs do not routinely record or report their WBL numbers may indicate that WBL is unremarkable, because it is fundamentally about student learning and differs only from non-WBL in terms of delivery and assessment but not in how it meets the learning needs of their students. There is little or no internal demand for records of WBL provision, nor are there external drivers for including that dimension in regular HEI reporting.
Themes and issues which emerged from the data and the process of collecting it

The aim of this study was to establish a snapshot of the landscape of WBL in Scotland, rather than to attempt a detailed charting of WBL provision. The challenges in data collection encountered in this study are reflected in those experienced within a wider UK-wide study by the National Centre for Universities and Business (NCUB). It seems that the personal contact with each HEI which was possible in this study assisted in data collection, whereas colleagues in England found such data very difficult to extract.

Strategic importance of WBL

The energy and enthusiasm for WBL which was evident in the work of the Reference Group was reflected in the stakeholder interviews. WBL is of considerable importance to those who agreed to be interviewed as part of this study. That they were, to some degree, a self-selecting group limits the extent to which one can be confident in making claims based on the data which emerged. However, the commitment to and belief in the importance of WBL to the vast majority of those interviewed was striking. Employability and supporting and growing the Scottish Economy were the main motivational factors for participants’ involvement in WBL. Those directly involved in WBL conveyed a strong sense of mission about their work which

‘... can enhance knowledge exchange, teaching, learning within the university and can also impact on the Scottish economy.’ (ST2, Broker)

Responses to questions about the basis of their definitions of WBL and about their strategic priorities suggested that interviewees also saw WBL as a factor in supporting local communities and growing the economy of a region. Taken as a broad impression of attitudes to WBL in Scotland, it seems clear that there is a will to maintain the existing good practice in WBL and to develop this aspect of educational provision further.

In spite of the highly positive engagement of stakeholder interviewees in the study process, the level and scale of the strategic importance of WBL to stakeholder organisations is difficult to discern from the data collected. Both among and within HEIs there seemed to be a range of perspectives on WBL in strategic terms.

As reported in the ‘Findings’ section above, student numbers do not suggest a growth in WBL provision in HEIs in Scotland. This is somewhat at odds with the finding that 50% (10) of those interviewed reported that WBL was ‘fundamental’ to the work of their institution (see Figure 6). Perhaps the comment that

‘It [WBL] is becoming more important but is not by any means our core business’. (ST6, HEI)

may explain that discrepancy; it is increasing in strategic importance but that is not yet reflected in student numbers.
The eight (40%) respondents who reported that the importance of WBL was either ‘uneven’ or ‘not significant’ within their organisation would seem to reflect the dissonance which is apparent at the level of national policy making. One respondent from within an HEI whose avowed strategy includes WBL as an important element suggested that

‘it is still quite early stages of work based learning and despite various espousals to it, I think it is a bit of a Cinderella thing.’ (ST3, HEI)

But WBL has always been around:

‘It is not new because it has been going for a very long time. It is something different, which doesn’t quite fit.’ (ST10, HEI)

Along the same lines, one interviewee likened the current position of WBL in the HEI curriculum to the reintroduction of trams to a city. WBL – once an integral part of educational provision, even at HE level – had been largely removed and is now being put back in, with all the upheaval of a city tram system being re-installed.

To understand why there seemed to be a gap between the stated commitment to WBL and the importance which it is accorded within the organisations represented by the respondents in this study, it is useful to review the Scottish Government’s approach to supporting employability. While ‘employability’ and WBL are not necessarily synonymous and the issue of language in this area is one of the concerns raised by this and other studies, a more detailed perusal of policy and practice around ‘employability’ than is possible in this report may be helpful in exploring the apparently contradictory findings of this study.

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1 Thanks to Graham Nicholson of the University of Dundee for this engaging analogy.
Stakeholder interviewee comments suggest a lack of ‘joined-up’ thinking about WBL and related strategy in their own organisations as well as in national policy-making. These comments bring a concrete perspective to the broader puzzle of conflicting messages about how employability is to be supported. When asked ‘Where does WBL fit into your strategic goals?’, interviewees from HEIs provided a wide range of responses, including employability (4), the historic approach of the HEI (1) and attracting more students (1). In spite of a number of statements within the stakeholder interviews about the increasing importance of WBL in relation to Scottish Government Policy on improving the economy, HEIs pointed out that they are not required or incentivised to measure or report on WBL activity. This dissonance, and HEI solution to it, is illustrated in one comment in particular,

“The outcome agreement that we have with the Scottish Funding Council does not specifically give us a performance target for this one aspect of our work … we see it as being part of the mix.” (ST14, HEI)

A view emerged from some of the interviews with those who had a national perspective that Government policy and the way in which KPIs [Key Performance Indicators] are currently presented militate against the development of WBL in HEIs (ST10). The strategic importance of WBL at an organisational level was reported more positively in interviews with non-HEI respondents and a sense of frustration with HEIs’ perceived lack of ‘joined-up’ thinking caused some difficulties to potential partners. One WBL programme discussed by interviewees was discontinued for reasons of insufficient student numbers in the present economic climate despite winning a number of awards for course design and innovation. This suggests that WBL developments can take second place to the ‘bottom line’ of student numbers and short-to-medium term financial considerations, and are not able to withstand the current economic downturn.

The qualitative data in this study suggests that employers and HEIs, while sharing a strong commitment to the development of new ways of developing and managing WBL, need further development of partnerships and understanding before they achieve a shared strategic direction,

‘I think that training in general and work based learning are down the priority list to a certain extent … when it comes to business’. (ST16, Employer)

HEIs and other stakeholders may not need to share views on what WBL is and how best it should be delivered and managed but it is clear that there is a lack of consistency between and within HEIs on this topic. A respondent within an HEI but not involved in university-wide policy suggested that,

‘[WBL is] not core [to the work of the HEI] … At a strategic level for the university they are very engaged in this kind of new form of learning but that is probably way up at the top.’ (ST6, HEI)

While survey respondents did select an area in response to the question ‘Which subject area is the most strategically important to you?’, comments on the survey and other feedback to the research suggest that these answers might be unreliable; a typical comment was
‘I have marked [particular discipline area] as the most strategically important solely on grounds that there is no ‘other’ option. All four of the subjects listed fit with our flagship areas and each is of strategic importance.’

It is therefore not possible to draw any conclusion from the quantitative data about one discipline area being more strategically important than another.

So evidence from this study does not suggest a coherence of strategic aims in relation to WBL either across HEIs or within the wider community of interest. The issue of the relationships between HEIs and other stakeholders in WBL is explored further below, as is the challenge of distinguishing between ‘employability training’ and WBL.

**Student numbers and trends**

In spite of a strong thread emerging from the stakeholder interviews to the effect that WBL is becoming more important in HEI provision, it is not possible to verify that trend using the survey data. The only conclusions that can be drawn about student numbers from the general survey are that Business/Management is the area with the highest level of engagement in WBL (see Figure 3), followed by Nursing (Figure 4) and that student numbers in both discipline areas are remaining broadly constant.

The inconsistency of language around WBL, explored further below, is inextricably linked to the challenge of recording or reporting student numbers across the country. If we can’t agree what it is, but we ‘know it when we see it’, how can we count it? HEIs are not required to include information about WBL in reporting student registration numbers. Employers consider that WBL happens all the time on and off ‘the job’. They do not account for it separately though it could be extracted from personnel files if there was a reason to do so, which there is not at present. So, those working with the learners and the numbers have no reason to record those numbers and no common framework within which to do so either.
As illustrated by the extracts of the data provided, it would not be wise to place a great deal of confidence in any statement about trends in student numbers other than that of numbers mostly remaining constant (see Appendix 4). This is at odds, however, with the strong thread emerging from the stakeholder interviews to the effect that WBL is becoming more important in HEI provision. The quantitative data provide little evidence to support the view of a growing WBL element in HE in Scotland. It is possible that the growth being forecast in this area is happening in smaller programmes and in non-traditional areas of study. Arguably an alternative approach to researching this area would yield more relevant data and the case-study, with its small but more reliable set of data, is a step in that direction.

In spite of many reports of the growing importance of WBL in the light of the Scottish Government’s focus on employability, it is not clear how that focus is impacting on HEIs and their partners in terms of supporting their innovative developments in WBL across a range of discipline areas. More than one stakeholder expressed the view that a structure to allow those working in the field of WBL to meet and share information and views is essential if this aspect of HE is to move forward in a joined-up way. Such a forum may also support the publication of the many case-studies and small reports which abound in the sector but which are unpublished and so unavailable to colleagues and researchers alike.

**Relationship between HEIs and other stakeholders**

The relationship between HEIs and other WBL stakeholders is symbiotic in that each party needs the other in order to provide the quality and range of WBL which is required in the workforce. The impression which emerged from the qualitative data was that, in spite of the mutual dependency, each does not usually quite see the other’s point of view.

Learner, HEI, employer and training provider relationships are complex, as illustrated in the example of The Open University (OU).

**Open University students**

Over 70% of OU students are in employment. They are employees first and students second, experts in work and novices in the classroom. Recent research from the OU indicates that the relationship between learning and employment is complex (Thomson and Macintyre 2012). For example, if a learner wants to move up within a sector the link to the work context is clear, if she wants to move into another sector then it may appear that her study is “not linked to the work context” (Ball and Manwaring 2010, p. 4). The outcome of this kind of learning is personal development, it is individual, but these individual actions lead to the development of Scotland’s workforce, whether or not they are to the employer’s advantage in the short-term. These individual learning journeys also destabilise the view that WBL may be only about the relationship between a HEI and the employer to support the student – they can be more about the learner and her relationship to the wider economy than between the organisations who manage her learning opportunities.

In spite of, or perhaps because of, this complexity, non-HEI organisations to whom WBL is fundamental to their work found many HEIs partners to be less than flexible in their approach to engaging in joint work. The views from outside the HEI sector included a concern (stated specifically by ST7) that University structures and systems are too inflexible to respond quickly enough to the need for flexible learning which is fundamental to employers. Both within HEIs and externally, a thread emerged from the interviews which pointed out the need for HEIs to adapt to the new demands of cash-strapped businesses needing competitive provision of training. This
need was identified by several respondents and is illustrated within the case-study of the Scottish Police College. HEIs are changing how they work with external partners, and other stakeholders consider that those changes need to continue, particularly in relation to the complexity of the requirements of partners and the costing structures. The qualitative data in this study includes several reports of constructive engagement between HEIs and employers to meet the needs of workforce development in a cost-effective way.

An interview with an employer whose attempt to establish a joint WBL programme with an HEI which was not successful beyond the first year suggested that there can be a serious communication gap between an employer and an HEI. In the situation discussed in that interview, ‘viable’ meant different things to both parties, a difference which was not apparent until the HEI decided that the programme was not ‘viable’. Employer-HEI misunderstandings about what numbers would result in that programme being successful reportedly centred on the way that the student numbers were counted and this issue was mentioned in more than one non-HEI interview, suggesting that the problems cited by one employer also happened elsewhere. In the case of the failed partnership reported directly as part of this study, both parties had a clear but opposite idea of how they were counting the students and this was not explored in the planning stages, ultimately leading to a breakdown in the partnership arrangement,

“as far as they were concerned we were partner with a small p, not a Partner with a big P …we were never a part of the conversation around the development’ (ST9, Employer)

While this report of a failed partnership attempt was not replicated elsewhere in the data, the perspective of that employer makes salutary reading and reinforces the suggestion of a major power imbalance between HEI and (small) employer, viz.,

“even the official word on the closure of the course, it didn’t come to us’ (ST9, Employer)

In contrast, a respondent from a global company commented that ‘we consider that we are the big P’ (ST16, Employer) in terms of its partnership arrangements with HEIs and other training providers. In partnerships with very large companies, the power balance is different than when HEIs work with small, local employers.
The Scottish Police College is a specialist training provider and its experience illustrates the different ways in which employers, and those who represent them, are able to engage with HEIs and other accrediting bodies in order to secure the most appropriate and most cost-effective ‘badging’ for their students.

Scottish Police College

The Scottish Police College, a specialised training provider, offered some useful insights into the benefits and challenges of working with HEIs. The College is responsible for training of staff across Scotland. Consistency and quality are two of their key requirements for that training. The interview looked at three areas of training – that of teaching the job, that of training those who teach that job and leadership training for those in senior positions, or who wish to apply for promotion.

The College has worked in various ways with the SQA, SCQF and a number of HEIs over the years and the interview explored the employer perspective in those partnerships. All Police College training is delivered in-house. Much of the doing-the-job training is credit rated by the College, which is an SCQF credit-rating body. The staff members who deliver and assess that training are trained in-house and that trainer training is ‘badged’ through an accredited award (Diploma in Higher Education) from a HEI. All trainers are now required to study for this award as part of an established model of quality assurance. Because of the value to the employer and the students of a recognised award for trainer training, the College has always sought HEI badging. In the past this was charged by the HEI on a per capita basis, making budgeting difficult and this system therefore restricted the number of trainers who could qualify.

This training provider has now negotiated an arrangement with a HEI whereby a customised programme is designed and delivered (in-house) to their trainers for a fixed cost. The ‘badge’ of Diploma in Higher Education is awarded by the HEI. In this new arrangement the Police College is liable for a single fee, regardless of how many students are put forward for the programme.

Leadership and management training opportunities for senior staff and those seeking promotion within the Scottish Police Service is a third area where the College wishes to have formal recognition of successful students. In previous years it had enrolled students on mainstream management programmes in one or more HEIs. Because of the financial costs and administrative burden of this approach, the College has now opted for a Professional Development Award. The training is delivered in-house and is accredited as a specialised PDA by the SQA, and allows much of the learning to be workplace based, applying theory to practice.

2 The words ‘badge’ and ‘badging’ are used in this report as a generic way to refer to an award provided by an accrediting body. This is usually a Certificate or Diploma.
That most research about WBL, including this study, is commissioned through one or more HEIs and thereby affects the perspective which becomes ‘knowledge’, as suggested by one interviewee whose concern includes large numbers of employees whose professional development needs to start at academic levels well below that of HEI entry.

The suggestion that HEIs need to ‘look over the parapet’ in order to develop sustainable work-based learning which meets the needs of employers may be a helpful analogy when interpreting some of the data in this report.

‘you have to be willing to look over the parapet of HE into the other world of employment and see where things that people learn through their work can be relevant to a curriculum and also you have to be brave enough to realise that a student might be more knowledgeable than you about something, which is quite challenging I think for an academic.’ (ST8, Sector body).

‘you have to be willing to look over the parapet of HE into the other world of employment and see where things that people learn through their work can be relevant to a curriculum and also you have to be brave enough to realise that a student might be more knowledgeable than you about something, which is quite challenging I think for an academic.’ (ST8, Sector body).

Internal communication was raised by HEIs as a challenge to effective partnerships, ‘not knowing what my HEI is offering and to whom’ (ST4, HEI) was identified as the major obstacle to effective provision of WBL by one HEI respondent since ‘effective’ presumes both internal and external collaboration.

Inconsistency of language

‘I would know it when I saw it’ (ST17, HEI) neatly summed up the approach to (not) categorising HEI provision as WBL. As noted in many previous studies, such as Nixon et al. (2006), the language of WBL is inconsistent within the HEI sector and used even more loosely across the wider stakeholder group. Data collection within this study suggested that WBL is not usually understood in the same way across organisations and not always within organisations either. The distinction between WBL and other forms of learning is not usually considered important in administrative or reporting terms, though the demands on the academic and administrative staff of working on WBL courses are quite different than when working on mainstream academic courses. Furthermore, many other courses, modules and programmes which may not be seen as WBL will often have aspects of WBL and employability enhancement, e.g. talks from businesses, field visits, extracurricular activities etc., and these will not be recorded separately as WBL.

The interview data suggest that most organisations (60%) did not agree on a definition of WBL. This was explained in terms of a lack of any reason to agree upon a definition and some respondents noted that agreeing such a definition internally was a work-in-progress. While HEIs feel that they could have some control over a definition, at least internally, employers are unclear what WBL means and feel that control over the definition rests elsewhere,

‘it is capitalised [in the literature] as if it means something specific and I am not convinced that that definition is clear, certainly not to employers.’
(ST9, Employer)

‘none [no agreed definition] just now - confusion between employability and WBL and this causes problems, including funding problems.’
(ST4, HEI)
Alongside the lack of an agreed definition within most organisations consulted in this study, a further issue emerged in relation to the seeming interchangeability of the terms ‘WBL’ and ‘employability’. When asked about WBL, many HEIs responded in terms of ‘employability’. This particular issue does not seem to cause any operational problems for any of those interviewed but it can hinder access to Government funding for new developments which tend to focus on ‘employability’ at the expense of ‘WBL’ (ST8). The data includes reports of many initiatives taking place in HEIs under the banner of ‘employability’ in spite of that apparently being defined by Scottish Government as the preserve of FE.

How WBL is defined and recorded does not seem to be problematic in practice but it hinders research into the provision of WBL (what is provided, where, in what numbers and at what level?) and it may also restrict opportunities for funding developments in this area. On the other hand, it may be helpful for WBL to remain a broad and flexible term; that may allow more innovative development within and between stakeholder organisations.

**Accreditation**

Interviews with employers and those representing interests other than HEIs provide evidence to suggest that the accreditation of WBL provision is a source of concern and challenge within actual or potential partnerships. Those challenges have led to new solutions, such as the options now available to the Scottish Police College and described in that case-study.

The literature on WBL design suggests that a real WBL partnership would involve joint design and development (Ball and Manwaring 2010). The employer partner would expect to be involved in the design of the assessment and in the process of student assessment also. Findings from this study are in line with other studies on work-based learning and suggest that assessment tends to be sited firmly within the domain of academic staff,

> “Equity and quality assurance issues militate against the involvement of employers in the assessment of learning, even though they could (and, in some instances, do) contribute. Where employers are engaged in the assessment process their role tends to be in mentoring students on the technical aspects of work-based projects and providing feedback on the performance (or ‘capability’) of the student to the academic staff.” Nixon et al, 2006, cited in McTavish and Bayley, 2010, p 239.

Accreditation seemed to be core to the employers’ rationale for engaging in a WBL partnership, as illustrated in the case of the Scottish Police College above. The qualitative data about accreditation provided useful information about assessment as well as the accreditation itself. As might be expected, the perspectives of the HEI interviewees in this study tended to be different than those of their prospective partners.

> ‘What are the challenges of WBL?’

> ‘Assessment […] because it has to be authentic or at least appropriate for work based learning.’ (ST8, Sector body)
University of the Highlands and Islands case-study

Detailed responses about WBL provision in UHI provided some interesting data about their provision and assessment of WBL.

While the data from the general survey suggest quite limited use of WBL in most discipline areas, figures from this case-study, where detailed data are available across six curriculum areas, suggest that WBL is provided more widely than the general survey might indicate. Student numbers for areas other than Business & Leisure and Administration & IT within the case study are below 500 but are mostly reported to be ‘generally rising’. Some of the WBL courses included in the case-study are quite new, such as Sports Management and so it was difficult for the HEI to predict the trend of those student numbers. For that reason, Sports Management is not included in Figure 8.

WBL is developing in new areas of study and this may have been a factor in the challenges of responding to a survey based on broad and traditional disciplines, for example, in the case-study, the programme ‘Engaging with External Agencies’ is based in Biological Sciences. Future research should be alert to the dangers of using traditional discipline frameworks for data collection in this developing area.
WBL is offered across six Schools/Discipline areas in UHI. These courses range in credit points from 20 to 120 and from SCQF level 7 to 10. As well as Sports Management, which is too new an area to have data on trends, Figure 8 shows that student numbers in three areas tend to be small, below 50, but, where data is available, are either rising (2) or staying constant (1). Two areas have higher student numbers, between 100 and 500, and one of those areas is Business and Management, which is consistent with the data from across all HEIs. The areas with high student numbers report that these numbers are holding constant.

Unsurprisingly, in UHI, which covers such a vast rural area (see Figure 7), all WBL courses are delivered by a combination of methods, which include:

- blended learning - video-conference, face-to-face, online
- online delivery but including real time communication
- mainly face to face with some students choosing distance
- video-conference.

All sections of UHI who provided information about placements reported that the courses did have a placement and they range from two weeks to one year. Even within one HEI, albeit a large and diverse HEI, the role of the partner organisation(s) are different for each course, so there is no one model of partnership.

The data is not extensive enough to draw any conclusions about links between types of assessment and any other factor but are interesting in terms of being a snapshot of one HEI’s provision. The assessment process varied between courses but most required a portfolio and report. Self-assessment is part of some of the courses. Only 20% of assessment in the WBL provision reported by UHI is undertaken in the workplace. The assessment is usually conducted within UHI, and where the partner is involved in the assessment it is either conducted in the workplace, by submission of a report or direct contribution to the assessment of the student’s work. 60% of the assessment process involves the non-HEI partner in formal engagement and/or written contributions to the assessment process.

In UHI, which covers such a vast rural area (see Figure 7), all WBL courses are delivered by a combination of methods:

- **Courses delivered by blended learning:**
  All interaction modes are optional – the student may use a combination of face-to-face, telephone, online synchronous and asynchronous communications.

- **Courses delivered primarily online:**
  Real time communication (e.g. video-conferencing) and asynchronous communications (e.g. forums) are required modes. Other modes are optional.

- **Courses delivered mainly face-to-face:**
  Other types of interaction are usually optional, though some students can choose distance-learning methods, where the real time communication is by video-conferencing.
Assessment

It seems likely, from the data in the interviews, that in spite of this level of engagement by the employers involved in the UHI case-study, the final word on assessment across the sector rests with the HEI. Where an HEI awards the final ‘badge’ they are, indeed, ‘Partners with a big P’, at least in terms of the assessment process. The majority of the HEI-based interviewees in this study were clear that control of assessment and the ‘last word’ must rest with them.

“We are the assessors; we are the credit bearing organisation, not them.’ (ST19, HEI)

“We don’t hand over responsibility for assessing the student to the employer or the place where the work is being done. We retain control of that.’ (ST14, HEI)

‘the ultimate responsibility for any form of assessment resides here [in the HEI]’ (ST14, HEI)

Employers, on the other hand, consider that someone in the workplace assessing work which is being done in the workplace is fundamental to valid assessment. Discussing what constitutes work-based learning, one employer reflected comments from others in stating that:

‘assessment, in particular of the skills, would be done by a professional in the workplace, someone who had more experience [than the student] of doing it. [...] they should have something that they have signed off; this is a competent individual.’ (ST9, Employer)

Accreditation is not always important to employers. The stakeholder interviews suggested that it may not be relevant at pre-degree level (ST5, Training provider) and not at all at senior management level (ST16, Employer, and ST17, HEI). More than one employer suggested that the employing organisation may not always wish training to be accredited, as it may make it easier for staff to find another job and that can be perceived as not usually being in the employer’s best interests.

The ‘badging’ of qualifications is important in some areas of work to some employers but the costs of a full badging agreement with a University is very expensive and even large employers now need to reconsider their financial obligations and seek a more cost-effective way of achieving the status which they sought under previous accreditation agreements. The Professional Development Award (PDA), accredited by the SQA, has become an attractive alternative to a HEI-badged award at undergraduate level. Another alternative to HEI accreditation is for employers to become
an accrediting body with SCQF, which they can do for a minimal cost compared with any other method of accrediting a course. Organisations are usually mindful that accreditation, even in-house, is never cost-free but many feel that they have more control over future costs if the process is managed in-house. Some stakeholders reported that the previous process of universities presenting fixed charges for accreditation is changing and it seems that, in the current economic climate, it is possible for employers to negotiate new ways of purchasing the accreditation and/or ‘badging’ which they want to be able to offer their employees.

The desire to be able to provide an HEI-badged award is sometimes stronger at higher levels of study, such as leadership and management programmes; “To add value a credit-based system would need to be trans-regional and enable greater transparency, transferability and consistency across the UK higher education sector.” (Nixon et al. 2006, p. 51). HEI accreditation would provide that value but not all employers or learners need, want or can afford to engage in that accreditation route.

Many external partners are finding more flexible ways to accredit their own workplace learning and are being selective in how and where they seek accreditation, as illustrated in the case-study of the Scottish Police College. NHS Education for Scotland (NES) has taken a slightly different approach to the challenge of accreditation of in-house training. Most of the literature about WBL is commissioned through the HEIs and so it looks at WBL as starting within a qualification pathway. NES is starting at a different point and looking at WBL in terms of recognition of learning coming through a work process, so it is almost the reverse of the HEI perspective.
NHS Education for Scotland (NES)

NES is the national health board responsible for supporting the education, training and development of staff in all areas of the National Health Service in Scotland (NHS Scotland). NHS Scotland is Scotland’s largest employer, employing approximately 150,000 people across the country. More than 40% of this workforce is employed in non-registered support roles, providing essential support for the delivery of safe and effective healthcare services.

Much of the learning undertaken by the staff in these support roles takes place in the workplace, through the informal learning which occurs as part of the working process and the non-formal learning which may take place as a result of participation in learning provision (e.g. in-house training courses) but which is not assessed or certificated. Although this learning meets the immediate needs of staff, helping them to deliver key services, the lack of formal certification poses a number of challenges for individuals, such as:

- Duplication of learning: The lack of formal quality assurance processes means that much of the in-house learning undertaken is not transferable. As a result, if a staff member moves from one role to another – or from one area of Scotland to another – they often have to repeat learning.
- Lack of progression in learning: The lack of formal recognition means that individuals find it difficult to build on what they have already achieved.
- Limited career progression: Many of the higher-level posts to which staff might aspire require formal work-related qualifications (text above adapted, with permission, from Adams 2013).

NES has developed systems to use recognition of prior informal and non-formal learning (RPL) to help staff in support roles move back into formal learning at an appropriate level. This approach focuses on ‘credit-rate-ability’ – it is not necessary to accredit all training but training should be designed with potential RPL in mind.

Given the scale of the workforce which it serves, NES must consider the cost implications of formalising learning and, crucially, of providing ‘badging’ for in-house training. All accreditation, internal and external, has a monetary cost, ‘you have got to be careful not to credit rate everything that moves because it is hugely expensive’. External costs are more easily identifiable but an organisation needs to be aware of the internal costs of being a credit-rating body and of accrediting in-house and on-the-job training. The NES solution is to educate internal training providers on how to make training outcomes easy for the learner to claim RPL when and if they wish or need to. Such training would have clear objectives and be based around learning outcomes which could be translated into an application for RPL in the future.

Even when able to customise training and accreditation, current funding structures remain a challenge to a training provider like NES, ‘although we are talking about a real, a radical rethink of how you value what people learn in and through work, the funding structure still very much supports [the idea of] that person in a classroom, usually on a full time basis’.
This issue arose repeatedly when interviewees were asked what could assist them in the development of WBL in their organisation or area of work. Sometimes the responses were about actual funding but most were about the funding structures which militate against sustainable developments. Several of the respondents discussed the difficulty in making and implementing plans when working with one-year cycles of funding. Another training provider respondent reported having to apply for funding to each local authority within which his national organisation operates. The administrative cost of navigating these structures is high to those who have to prepare repeated applications and submissions. A training broker reported applying for matched funding when one element of the 'match' works on a three-year basis and the other on an annual basis. Applications sometimes have to be for a three year plan but the applications for the funding must be made annually.

‘the one year span, it makes it difficult to work strategically because your timescale is so short’ (ST15, Broker).

When funding is structured around traditional views of students and learning, it does not match the needs of workforce development,

‘the structure of funding for education isn’t keeping up with change and the need for the type of education that is being delivered […] Although we are talking about a real and radical rethink of how you value what people learn in and through work, the funding structure still very much supports [the idea of] that person in a classroom, usually on a full time basis (ST12, Provider)’

While the Scottish Government has allocated resources to improving employability, this is often seen as preparing people for work and thus reducing unemployment, rather than developing the existing workforce. One organisation explained their view of the funding approach in terms of costs versus investment,

‘Training and development or the development of a workforce is always identified as a cost rather than an investment in the UK, whereas if you look … at Germany and many other of our partners on the continent, it is seen as an investment rather than a cost, and you only have to look at their economies to identify how effective they are. So in a sense the government recognises that it has a responsibility whether that is central government, local government, regional government … they all recognise that they have a responsibility to contribute to workforce development, wherever it is, and whoever is delivering it, but it is also about employers recognising that they have a contribution … it requires a culture change’ (ST7, National accrediting body).
Funding of WBL initiatives is an issue for HEIs as well as organisations in other sectors,

‘I think where we can, we are, very effective [in supporting businesses] but it is very difficult for us in a funding climate that works year to year and doesn’t allow us any money to invest and doesn’t provide us with opportunities to try new things, in particular’ (ST17, HEI).

Conclusions

This study set out to sketch a picture of the landscape of WBL in Scotland. It was first necessary to create parameters for the study, given the widely different definitions of WBL which are used as well as the wide range of learning which comes under that term, however defined. A Reference Group, comprised of HEI colleagues with a particular interest in WBL, helped to steer the study through the complex arena that is WBL at Higher Education level in Scotland.

Quantitative data was collected by means of an e-survey and broader qualitative data was elicited by means of interviews with stakeholders in the area. Those who were interviewed included representatives from HEIs, employers, training brokers and sector bodies. A marked feature of the data collection was the enthusiastic co-operation of colleagues across all these organisations and the resulting richness of the qualitative data.

Colleagues from all perspectives who engaged with this study are committed to the provision of high-quality WBL which meets the needs of learners and employers.

WBL is fundamental to many of the organisations who contributed to this study. It was difficult, however, to discern the strategic importance of WBL to HEIs. HEIs must juggle competing priorities within broader mission statements and WBL appears more in the developing curriculum than in any strategic objectives. The Scottish Government’s strategic priorities for the economy do not mention WBL but focus, instead, on employability. Measures to support employability are often expected to be about preparing young people for work, or supporting unemployed people back into work. Workforce development does not fit easily into this paradigm, which will help to explain the somewhat contradictory data which emerged from this study.

The strategic position of WBL within HEIs has been difficult to identify. Clarity on this topic is not helped by the frequent conflation of the terms ‘WBL’ and ‘employability’.

A further issue in relation to measuring the importance of WBL is that, not only is there no agreement on the definition of WBL, but it is not identified as such in the recording systems of any HEI; that information resides with the staff of the Schools and Departments involved. The qualitative data suggest that HEIs have no reason to measure or report what WBL they provide. Both these factors seem to result in a lack of routine measurement, counting or reporting of WBL provision by HEIs.
WBL is not separately tagged or reported within HEIs. This may well be symptomatic of an integrated view of WBL as ordinary learning rather than as a different kind of activity.

It may not be counted and measured as a routine process, but WBL is a feature of very many disciplines in HEIs, including those not usually associated with practical work. While most WBL is offered in Management/Business, followed closely by Nursing, it is also reported in less expected areas such as Law and Physical Sciences. It is difficult, from the data available, to generalise about trends in student numbers.

Student numbers in WBL are rising in some areas and falling in others but holding constant seems to be the predominant trend.

Stakeholders from a range of perspectives are committed to continuing their work on WBL as a means of developing the workforce, providing flexible learning opportunities to students in employment, supporting businesses and, ultimately enhancing the Scottish economy at local and national levels. The challenges of working with WBL include relationships between HEIs and employers. Assessment is one of the challenges within that relationship, and data from the UHI case-study illustrates the complexity of this aspect of partnership working.

Partnership working in relation to WBL can be fruitful and rewarding. The reported challenges include communication and assessment - who should assess and how?

Outside of the HEI sector there is a considerable level of WBL being undertaken by employers and training providers. Some, but by no means all, of WBL is assessed and accredited, and some of that accreditation is undertaken in partnership with an HEI. While ‘badging’ by an HEI is attractive to many employers and learners, the administrative and financial costs of such a partnership have become prohibitive to some providers and employers who find other ways of meeting their needs for external accreditation. HEIs now seem to be open to negotiation about cost-setting (ST20) but accreditation by the SQA or through an SCQF accreditation of the organisation can provide a more relevant and cost-effective solution to the search for the status previously associated with badging by an HEI.

Training providers and employers are increasingly finding ways other than HEI-‘badging’ to accredit their in-house provision.

A challenge that affected all those with whom this issue was discussed is that of funding. The problems reported were not simply about a lack of funding, rather stakeholders talked about funding structures which made planning very difficult. Those involved in developing new ways of working with WBL argued that it was difficult, if not impossible, to achieve sustainability in those areas of work for which funding had to be applied each year. Smaller organisations raised concerns about the core staff resources which were necessary for the regular funding application process.

Funding was the biggest challenge facing all those working in WBL. Their frustrations are with the lack of coherence and consistency of funding structures, rather than the amount of funding available.
Recommendations

1 Place of WBL in national strategy

If WBL is to be supported and developed, the issues of its place in the Scottish Government’s strategic plans must be clearer. This would involve an examination of the structures which currently support employability and the link between this priority and the reporting requirements of HEIs.

Learners, employers and those managing WBL provision within HEIs may benefit from streamlining in how it is described, presented and reported. The recent work by the QAA Scotland on guidelines for RPL may serve as a useful model, along with the JISC findings on the use of the Work-based Learning Maturity Toolkit. If, as recommended in the latter report, this framework were to be slimmed down for ease of use, it could be used as a guidance document on developing and implementing WBL consistently across the HE sector.

2 Funding

For stakeholders other than HEIs the structure of funding systems for all kinds of workforce development and adult learning militates against long-term planning and development. Even within HEIs some developments operate on one-year funding bases. Some consideration of, and clarity regarding, what funding systems and structures are involved in developing and delivering WBL would be beneficial in illuminating gaps and overlaps with a view to facilitating more equitable provision of WBL opportunities across the country.

Small amounts of funding to facilitate those involved in WBL developments to meet, share good practice/challenges and publish information about the much innovative work that is happening across the country would be supportive of those developments and would assist in bringing consistency and growth to this aspect of HE.

3 Further research

Any plans for future research in this area would need to consider the difficulty in identifying WBL data within HEIs as well as the conflation of terms in this area. Future research into WBL provision in HEIs should bear in mind that traditional divisions of courses into discipline areas might not be helpful as a framework for a study and that alternative ways of collecting data might be considered.

If WBL is to be fostered in HE, there is a need for a wider collaborative piece of research work which would include all levels of HE. It may be more effective to consider a longitudinal study of the development of WBL within HEIs. It may not be particularly helpful to aim for detail on course provision but rather to scope the situation at all HE levels and, in particular, to examine the impact on businesses that WBL has in practice, see Recommendation 5 below.
4 Focus on post-graduate and post-doctoral developments

Because the scope of this study had to be narrowed to learning at undergraduate level, it did not collect information on either WBL provided at pre-degree level or at post-graduate and post-doctoral levels. Evidence from the stakeholder interviews and other consultations within the study suggests that an account of WBL provision at those levels would yield valuable data in terms of the enrichment of the workforce and the wider economy. The higher (academic) level projects which came to the attention of the researcher seemed to furnish good examples of the more ‘pure’ form of WBL which is propounded in the academic literature and to which the QAA Scotland definition points. These projects are often highly collaborative, jointly designed and managed by HEIs and employers and/or sector bodies. Further research into accredited but sub-degree level training and post-graduate WBL would complement the findings of this study.

5 Fractal studies may illuminate the impact of WBL

Given the added value of the case-study data which illuminated some of the issues raised in this study, it may be useful to consider a study of the impact of WBL. One way to proceed might be to focus on one or more fractal analyses of the micro impacts of WBL. Micro impacts are not easy to measure but such studies may help to understand the impact of WBL on small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in order to illuminate the outcomes of WBL and its medium-to-long term value to the Scottish economy. A closer examination of how WBL works for businesses and what issues arise in a number of SMEs may shed light on broader challenges.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the co-operation of all those who provided information and views on WBL for this study and, in particular, the consistent support and critical input of the members of the Reference Group.

Naomi Jeffery, Information Analyst at the Open University in Scotland, advised on data collection methodology and produced data visualisations.

All omissions and errors remain the responsibility of the report authors.
References


Appendices

1  Membership of the Reference Group
2  Survey questions
3  Interview questionnaire
4  Student numbers and trends
Appendix 1 - Membership of the Reference Group

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Queen Margaret University

**Jamie Brogan**  
Business Engagement Manager  
Edinburgh Napier University

**Peter Cannell**  
Depute Director  
The Open University in Scotland

**Derek Goldman**  
Learning and Teaching Co-ordinator  
The Open University in Scotland

**Margaret Hawthorne**  
GGAP (Greater Glasgow Articulation Partnership) / GCU LEAD  
Glasgow Caledonian University

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Information Analyst  
The Open University in Scotland

**Ronnie Macintyre**  
Learning and Teaching Co-ordinator  
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**Rob Macpherson**  
Subject Leader, Business and Leisure  
University of the Highlands and Islands

**Greg McCarra**  
Lecturer & Module Leader, Work Based Learning (WBL)  
School of Computing  
Edinburgh Napier University

**Frances Rowan**  
Careers and Employability Service  
University of the West of Scotland
Appendix 2 - Survey questions

Q1 Please let us know your institution: (If you are employed by more than one Scottish HEI please select all that apply).

Q2 Please let us know which of the following best describes your discipline area: (If your discipline area is not listed please select ‘Other’ and specify).

Q3 Your role within the HEI:

- Academic (1)
- Academic related (2)
- Graduate Teaching Assistant (3)
- Administrative (4)
- Management (5)
- Other - please specify: (6) ____________________

Q4 Geographical cover of your HEI provision: (Not just Work-based Learning).

- Urban (1)
- Rural (2)
- Scotland-wide (3)
- UK (4)
- Europe (5)
- Worldwide (6)
- Other - please specify: (7) ____________________

Q5 In what subject areas does your institution provide work-based learning as defined here? (Please select all that apply)

- Architecture/Built Environment (1)
- Business/Management (2)
- Education (3)
- Engineering/Technology (4)
- Languages (5)
- Law (6)
- Librarianship (7)
- Mathematics (8)
- Music/Drama/Arts (9)
- Nursing (10)
- Other professionals allied to Medicine (11)
- Physical Science (12)
- Rural/outdoor studies (13)
- Social Work/Care (14)
- Other - please specify: (15) ____________________
Q5a_1 Approximately how many students registered in the subject area [...] in 2012/13?

- Up to 50 students (1)
- Between 50 and 100 students (2)
- Between 100 and 500 students (3)
- Between 500 and 1000 students (4)
- Over 1000 students (5)

[Note: this question was asked in relation to each subject area selected in Q5]

Q5b_1 How are student numbers in the subject area [...] changing year on year?

- Generally rising (1)
- Holding constant (2)
- Generally falling (3)
- Numbers change considerably from year to year (4)

[Note: this question was asked in relation to each subject area selected in Q5]

Q6 Which subject area is the most strategically important to you?

- Architecture/Built Environment (1)
- Business/Management (2)
- Education (3)
- Engineering/Technology (4)
- Languages (5)
- Law (6)
- Librarianship (7)
- Mathematics (8)
- Music/Drama/Arts (9)
- Nursing (10)
- Other professionals allied to Medicine (11)
- Physical Science (12)
- Rural/outdoor studies (13)
- Social Work/Care (14)
- Other - please specify: (15)

Q7 Please provide any information or comments that you would like to include here:
Q8 We may wish to get in touch with you to explore in more detail some of the information you have provided. If you would be willing for us to contact you for this purpose please provide the following information:

Your name: (1)
Your email address: (2)
Your organisation’s name: (3)
An alternative contact name in your organisation (if appropriate): (4)

Q9 May we use the data you have provided as part of the study report?

☐ Yes (1)
☐ No (2)

Q10 Would you like to see a preview of that part of the report relating to your organisation?

☐ Yes please (1)
☐ No thank you (2)
Appendix 3 – Outline questionnaire for stakeholder interviews

1. Organisational information

- Name of organisation
- Type of organisation (HEI, Employer, Training provider, …)
- Sectors:
  - Funding: Public/Private/Voluntary sector
  - Activity: Education/manufacturing/service industry/public service
- Geographical location of organisation main base
  - Urban/rural
- Geographical cover of service
  - Urban/rural/Scotland/UK/Europe/worldwide
- Your role in relation to WBL in Scotland

2. WBL in your context

- How do you define WBL?
  - What do you base that on?
  - Is it universally shared across the organisation?
- Is WBL an active or dormant part of what you offer in your institution/organisation?
  - Is it incidental or more fundamental?

3. About the pedagogy and WBL provision

- What aspect of WBL learning is most important to your organisation?
- How does WBL fit into the strategic goals of your organisation?
  - What strategic alignments does your Institution establish in relation to WBL?
    E.g. priority growth areas, particular employment sectors?
  - What factors are most important in making those strategic decisions?
4. What you offer in terms of WBL programmes (courses, qualifications etc)

- What WBL activity is happening within your organisation? \((only \ relevant \ for \ some \ interviews)\)
  - Subject
  - Numbers
  - Accreditation
  - SCQF level
  - Dominant model of delivery
  - Are placements as part of that activity?

5. The impact of WBL provision

- What WBL-related successes have been achieved by your organisation?
- What WBL-related successes have been achieved by your partners?

6. The opportunities and barriers in/to WBL in your institution

- How does your institution identify and response to opportunities in relation to WBL?
  - Responses to Scottish Government initiatives, for example
- What WBL-related frustrations/challenges do you face?
  - How could those frustrations/challenges be addressed?
  - By whom?
- In order to develop WBL in the way you would like what do you need from:
  - Your own organisation
  - HEIs
  - Scottish Funding Council
  - Employers
  - Other partners
  - Other

7. Finally

- If you could identify two things that you could do in your institution to increase the amount of WBL activity - what would they be?
Appendix 4 – Student numbers and trends

**Student numbers and trends in Architecture / Built Environment**

**Architecture/Built Environment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Numbers</th>
<th>Trend</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over 1000 students</td>
<td>![Icon] Generally rising</td>
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<td>Between 500 and 1000 students</td>
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<td>Up to 50 students</td>
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**Student numbers and trends in Business / Management**

**Business/Management**

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<td>Up to 50 students</td>
<td>![Icon] Generally falling</td>
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</table>

Each icon represents one responding institution; their student numbers are:
### Student numbers and trends in Education

**Education**

- Over 1000 students
- Between 500 and 1000 students
- Between 100 and 500 students
- Between 50 and 100 students
- Up to 50 students

### Student numbers and trends in Engineering / Technology

**Engineering/Technology**

- Over 1000 students
- Between 500 and 1000 students
- Between 100 and 500 students
- Between 50 and 100 students
- Up to 50 students

Each icon represents one responding institution; their student numbers are:

- **△** Generally rising
- **◆** Holding constant
- **▽** Generally falling
- **◇** Changing considerably year on year
**Student numbers and trends in Languages**

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Languages</th>
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<tbody>
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**Student numbers and trends in Law**

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Each icon represents one responding institution; their student numbers are:
- [▲]: Generally rising
- [►]: Holding constant
- [▼]: Generally falling
- [◇]: Changing considerably year on year

*Work-based Learning: a baseline study*
### Student numbers and trends in Music / Drama / Arts

**Music/Drama/Arts**

- Over 1000 students
- Between 500 and 1000 students
- Between 100 and 500 students
- Between 50 and 100 students
- Up to 50 students

### Student numbers and trends in Nursing

**Nursing**

- Over 1000 students
- Between 500 and 1000 students
- Between 100 and 500 students
- Between 50 and 100 students
- Up to 50 students

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Each icon represents one responding institution; their student numbers are:
- Generally rising
- Holding constant
- Generally falling
- Changing considerably year on year
### Student numbers and trends in other professions allied to Medicine

**Other professions allied to Medicine**

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### Student numbers and trends in Physical Science

**Physical Science**

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Each icon represents one responding institution; their student numbers are:

- ▲: Generally rising
- ▶: Holding constant
- ◄: Generally falling
- ◇: Changing considerably year on year
## Student numbers and trends in Rural/outdoor studies

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## Student numbers and trends in Social Work/Care

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Each icon represents one responding institution; their student numbers are: Generally rising, Holding constant, Generally falling, Changing considerably year on year.