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PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

Workplace learning courses in Irish third-level colleges

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research is to ascertain data in relation to courses that are currently on offer in seven third-level institutions in Ireland which include elements of workplace learning. It is intended that the research findings will contribute to the provision of new workplace learning programmes in Irish third-level colleges.

Design/methodology/approach – A questionnaire was designed for this research and was administered in seven higher education colleges in Ireland. In total, 433 courses were examined in relation to workplace learning.

Findings – The findings illustrate that there is still an over-reliance on the provision of traditional classroom-based courses. The findings further suggest that, for the successful operation of workplace learning programmes, there is scope for developing further employer engagement with higher education colleges in the design, development and delivery of such programmes.

Practical implications – As a result of the data collected for this research, recommendations for implementing workplace learning programmes for both third-level education providers and employers are included here.

Originality/value – The paper provides value by identifying courses in Irish third-level colleges which include elements of workplace learning and suggests that an attitudinal and cultural shift must be engaged with to overcome the traditional reliance on classroom-based programmes in order to successfully develop new workplace learning programmes.

Keywords Workplace learning, Tertiary education, Ireland

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In Ireland, until recent years, the emphasis in state-funded third-level education was almost entirely towards “for-employment” rather than “in-employment” education and training. In-employment training has, for the most part, been largely disconnected from the formal education qualifications system. The newer emphasis on upskilling of persons already in the labour force poses new and significant challenges. This is particularly true for those at the lower skills level who find it difficult to access education and training opportunities.

Learning for Life (Department of Education and Science, 2000), Ireland’s first White Paper on Adult Education, confirmed that skill shortages continue to threaten Ireland’s economic prospects, a view endorsed by all stakeholders, who also agreed on the priority status of the skill shortage issue. The White Paper, however, reported that “there is less agreement as to how workplace education should be organised and



financed” (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 76). Since the publication of the White Paper, educators, employers, and politicians have given increased attention to the concept of learning as a lifelong activity. Within the context of lifelong learning, learning required by the workplace and which takes place at work and through work has a predominant role in determining the content and direction of learning. As work environments increasingly move to knowledge-based environments, with their increasing dynamic and changing contexts, ongoing upskilling of employees is required. Work-based training and education is ideally suited to serve this need. Rapidly changing contexts now require training and education curricula that are fluid, dynamic, and continually responsive to volatile workplace environments and to societal change. Third-level institutions need to continually engage with the crucible of changing work environments, where newly created contexts continually demand educators to respond quickly to new and ever-changing circumstances.

This paper presents data in relation to the provision of third-level courses which provide elements of workplace learning in seven higher education institutions in various geographical locations throughout Ireland. The findings from this research illustrate that workplace learning is already challenging the current structures of third-level academic institutions, requiring them to be flexible in terms of mode of delivery, in the context of the accreditation of prior experiential learning, and in the accreditation of in-company training or work-based projects. It is also clear from the findings that, for the successful operation of workplace learning programmes, there is scope for developing further employer engagement with higher education institutes in the design, development implementation, and delivery of such programmes. As work contexts are now considered important for curriculum developments, this emphasis highlights the need for a sharing of the responsibility for creating new learning opportunities. This should better assist the student to achieve both the academic knowledge and higher-level skills to meet the needs of employers. From the current findings, a further challenge emerging for third-level institutes emphasises the need to take on a more flexible approach to delivery, utilising a mixed mode or blended approach to learning. The blended learning approach enables the student to have greater control over when and where the learning takes place, and is particularly suited to those learners *in employment*, as it allows the learning to be built around other work and lifestyle commitments.

2. Methodology

A questionnaire was developed and distributed to seven higher education institutions throughout Ireland in order to gather data on courses that offer elements of workplace learning. These institutions were selected because they are collaborative partners in a Strategic Innovation Fund project which was sponsored by the Irish government in 2006. The aims of the Strategic Innovation Fund are:

- to enhance collaboration in the higher education sector;
- to improve teaching and learning;
- to support institutional reform;
- to promote access and lifelong learning; and
- to support the development of fourth-level education.

The particular focus of this sub-strand of the Strategic Innovation Fund is on the learning needs of those already *in* the workforce, and includes lifelong learning as a

central aim by placing significant emphasis on continual professional development and upskilling in the workforce.

The survey aimed to illustrate a snapshot of the higher education landscape by highlighting “what we know” and “what we do not know” about workplace learning, and in doing so identify areas on which to focus attention in the future from an institutional and pedagogical perspective. The questionnaire was aimed at course co-ordinators and was available to be filled in electronically or at a face-to-face meeting with a member of the research team. The criteria for inclusion of courses were that they were targeted at students who are *in employment*, i.e. courses which are not accessed by Central Applications Office (CAO) entry, and usually delivered through part-time provision. The summary data presented here represents 433 courses, which is the total number of courses accounted for by all seven third-level institutions. A very large variety of courses is currently offered to the workplace by the third-level education providers; these include management, marketing, professional cookery, energy management, auctioneering, accountancy, palliative care, interior design, lean manufacturing, retail management, and enterprise development. The questionnaire aimed to ascertain information relevant to workplace learning, including National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) level, recognition of prior learning, and course delivery, in order to assist third-level institutions and employers in identifying available approved modules that will benefit learners. The findings from the research are presented below under the main themes that were investigated.

3. Level of courses on offer

The first question asked what level each course on offer was classified by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI) in the National Framework of Qualifications. The need for workplace learning to operate in the dual worlds of work and education means that a common language must be used to describe the outcomes of what is being undertaken. This language is represented in the national framework of qualifications. The National Framework of Qualifications comprises ten levels of qualifications, with each level based on nationally agreed standards, skills and competence. These standards define the learning outcomes to be achieved by learners seeking qualifications at each level. The ten levels include qualifications gained in settings from schools to places of work, the community, training centres and to colleges and universities, from the most basic to the most advanced levels of learning.

From the responses received, most courses (37.60 per cent) are offered at Level 6, whereby the learner receives a certificate on completion of the course. “New economy” theory suggests that advanced countries are witnessing a growth in “knowledge jobs” and there is an emphasis placed on knowledge-rich employment. One of the challenges, therefore, for higher education providers and employers is to promote further learning and to increase participation rates at Levels 7 and 8. The requirement to enhance the skill level of the working population presents a substantial task as Ireland’s participation rate in continuous learning (non-formal learning) is relatively poor. Only 14 per cent of the 25-64 years age group in Ireland engaged in non-formal learning in 2002, contrasting with a 16.5 per cent average in the twenty-five European Union states, and 34.5 per cent in Britain. A Forfás (2007) report suggests that the National Framework of Qualifications is a vital tool for the development of skills in the Irish knowledge economy and that the availability of data based on the National Framework of Qualifications is of the central importance. For employers and employees, the National Framework of Qualifications provides a means of assessing or demonstrating

that particular skill levels have been achieved. Qualification systems clearly add value to training and learning investments at the level of the national economy. Qualification systems promote labour mobility and the more effective matching of candidates and vacancies.

4. Course design

The next question related to the design of courses. The results of the survey show that the education institutions were responsible for designing 221 courses; only ten were designed by industry, and 47 were designed by both the education providers and industry. These findings relating to course design provide a challenge to third-level education providers, particularly because of the limited consultation with industry. It is clear that if academics develop courses in conjunction with employers, academics will necessarily lose much of their traditional role as the sole or primary course designer. The curriculum for the newer model is ultimately located within the workplace, and is individually renegotiated with each learner. Actual teaching is seldom required. It is replaced by two important new roles: that of the assessor and that of manager of the learning process. As assessor, the academic is required to evaluate learning in the workplace and determine its academic merit and worth.

Traditionally, courses have been designed by the education providers; however, current thinking on workplace learning provision is that initiatives should be “learner”- and “employer”-centric rather than being developed from the perspective of education or training providers. This in turn should give both the learner and employer greater ownership of newly developed courses. The design of workplace learning courses requires an appreciation of the complexities of learning and of the circumstances in which it can take place. Considerable design preparation is needed if meaningful and worthwhile courses are to be planned to suit the diversity of students in the workplace. One of the valuable features of courses designed by the industrial and educational partnership is the potential richness of resources and support available to learners. They can draw not only on the resources of the education institution but also those of the workplace. Additionally, when a course is designed in partnership by the educator and the employer, its role becomes one of assisting learners in identifying, developing, and recognising their individual learning in the context of their current jobs and future professional development.

The formation of a partnership between academics and employers should bring a new perspective to course design and development. Participation by employers in course design (covering duration, timing and content) should ensure that their employees would be beneficiaries of the course. One of the methods of achieving success for workplace learning courses is the inclusion of a workplace learning project which would be designed by the employer and the third-level educator. Advocates of workplace learning courses suggest that a main focus of these courses is on the delivery of a major workplace project (whether on an individual or collaborative basis) which addresses real-life issues and has the capacity to have an impact on the organisation.

A further reason for having the employer involved in course design is because of a difficulty faced by many organisations for placing due value on learning. While it is broadly accepted that learning is an essential capability for organisations, it is often among the first areas of activity to face budget cutbacks in times of difficulty. Traditional approaches to business performance measurement have focused chiefly on financial performance. If the employer has co-designed a course tailored to the needs of

both employees and organisational needs, it is more unlikely that the course will suffer financial cutbacks. Additionally, the partnership approach to course design and development demonstrates that the third-level provider is itself a learning organisation as it is able to transform the curriculum and develop new ways in which individuals and organisations can engage with higher education.

5. Recognition of prior learning

Another area to be investigated was the recognition of prior learning. Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is the generic term for systems such as Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) or Advanced Academic Standing, which are used within higher education to describe the awarding of credit to students on the basis of demonstrated learning that has occurred prior to admission. RPL is also used to refer to the recognition of (prior) non-formal and informal learning for qualifications. The term “prior” concerns learning that has taken place, but has not been formally assessed or measured, prior to entering a programme or seeking an award. The philosophy underlying the recognition of prior learning is to enable and encourage people to enter or re-enter formal education, leading to qualifications, by awarding or recognising credit for what they already know in the course curriculum. Workman (2008) summarises that academic recognition and academic assessment of *experiential* learning are the essential features of the recognition of prior learning. The measurement activities within the assessment process relate to two key factors – the volume of credit and the level of learning, which reflect academic level equivalence to undergraduate or postgraduate learning. The onus is on the student to demonstrate the prior learning, by preparing and submitting adequate evidence, under the guidance and advice of the academic institution.

The research illustrated there was no recognition of prior learning for 264 of the 433 courses surveyed. This finding suggests that significantly greater emphasis needs to be placed on recognising prior learning by third-level education providers. Recognition and accreditation of prior learning enables non-traditional entry into third-level courses as well as gaining credit for advanced standing. A recent report (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007) on RPL observed that an awareness of RPL among Irish employers, workers, and the general public is low. Until now, awareness of RPL has been limited to a small number of policy makers, education professionals, and people partaking in RPL.

The recognition of prior learning in Ireland is closely associated with the promotion of lifelong learning and the full implementation of the National Framework of Qualifications. For some decades, the recognition of prior learning has been used in Ireland to facilitate broader access to education and training programmes (particularly by mature learners in further and in higher education and training), to meet workplace requirements and personal needs/interests of learners. The number of learners who avail themselves of the recognition of prior learning has been and continues to be relatively small in comparison to the number who access education and training qualifications by formal routes. There is, however, a range of practice and experience in the recognition of prior learning in many fields of education and training.

The OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007) on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning notes that in Ireland “while RPL for access, credit/exemptions is generally practised, the concept of making full awards on the basis of RPL is a relatively new one (there is some international practice of this)”. The OECD recommends that Ireland should increase the availability of part-time

education, and other flexible forms of education and instruments such as RPL, to facilitate access to education.

Recognition and accreditation of prior learning are important and necessary for workplace learning courses. A process of portfolio development and assessment is needed for students to identify the point at which their formal work-based learning should commence. A major objective of the National Framework of Qualifications is to recognise all learning achievements. The National Framework of Qualifications aims to do this by supporting the development of alternative pathways to qualifications/awards and by promoting the recognition of prior learning.

6. Course delivery location

The next area to be investigated related to the delivery location of the courses. The results show that 364 courses are still delivered on campus, with only *two* out of the 433 courses surveyed delivered in industry/the workplace. This finding poses some serious challenges for Irish third-level education providers, and particularly for the delivery of workplace learning programmes. Most education providers have become conditioned to a classroom model that separates theory from practice, which can risk make learning seem impractical and irrelevant. Workplace learning, however, merges theory with practice and knowledge with experience. It recognises that the workplace offers as many opportunities for learning as the classroom does. While the workplace creates possibilities for learning, it is *how* individuals participate and interact in their workplace that is central to learning by individuals.

Learning in the workplace can occur at different levels and is different to classroom-based learning. Learners may be individuals, groups, whole organisations or inter-organisational networks. The nature of the learning varies as well. Although formal learning and informal workplace learning are different in nature, both are equally important for the development of vocational and professional expertise. Formal learning usually produces explicit knowledge, whereas informal learning largely produces tacit or implicit knowledge.

Third-level academic providers are now facing the challenge of working with course modules that require them to deal with converting work practices into learning practices that meet both education and industry standards. There are also issues regarding the place of theory and critical reflection for courses delivered in the workplace rather than those delivered in the classroom. The third-level providers also need to make the adjustment that courses delivered off-campus enables the learner to be responsible for, manage, and to timetable one's own learning, and to provide courses that require minimal attendance at a third-level institution.

7. Methods of assessment

The next issue to be addressed was that of assessment methods. The research results highlight that very traditional modes of assessment are still utilised by mainstream education providers. Exams and continuous assessments remain the favoured means of evaluation. One of the more interesting findings emerging from the research is that only *two* courses were assessed by means of project work.

Currently, most education institutions organise courses around credit points. These credits represent a discrete component of a course with specific learning outcomes and assessment processes. A challenge for education providers is to move from traditional class-based examination and assessment procedures to more innovative project work that can be completed in the workplace. This means that workplace learning

programmes must be flexible and responsive to the circumstances of the learner and of the work setting but without compromising on quality and standards from the perspective of the third-level institute. The focus should be on what students wish to learn, not just on what is provided for them to learn. The need for workplace learning, however, to operate in the dual worlds of work and education means that a common language must be used to assess the learning and describe the outcomes of what is undertaken. This language is represented in the National Framework of Qualifications. Assessment of work-based learning must meet the quality challenge as specified by the education institution, and should have reliable measures of the volume and level of work-based learning required.

Overall, academic institutions need to be assured that all courses meet rigorous academic standards, and the employer needs assurance that courses will prepare employees to contribute to the workplace with the highest attainable quality standards. Although the ultimate award of credits rests with the education provider, the employing organisation has to sustain its own interests. By reducing on-campus assessment methods, such as examinations, work-based learning can be responsive to the needs of those *in* employment who have multiple responsibilities in their lives.

8. Recommendations for implementing workplace learning

For many practitioners, workplace learning is already a vital and legitimate mode of learning which offers significant value for the strategic teaching and learning agendas of higher education institutions. Workplace learning also acts as a driver for greater innovation in the broader third-level education system. Extending this legitimacy, however, will necessitate developing strategies that cross the cultural bridge between learning and work, address the issues and challenges throughout the system, and demonstrate how the practices of work-based learning have wider applicability in the higher education sector. Based on a review of the current research, a number of recommendations for implementing work-based learning programmes can be suggested. These recommendations for higher education institutes and industry should enable significant progress on workplace learning agendas in the next number of years.

For higher education institutes:

- Acknowledge and provide a variety of approaches for those *in* employment to avail themselves of workplace learning offered by higher education institutes.
- Ensure that the recognition of prior learning is an integral component of all workplace learning programmes.
- Design user-friendly approaches for the recognition of prior learning and continuous professional development.
- Establish strong industry partnerships as a means to ensure participation and progression into higher education.
- Involve the employer in the design of the programme, particularly in relation to workplace projects and assignments to support the assessment of learning.
- Develop customised programmes to meet the needs of the individual and the organisation.
- Address the diverse range of knowledge and skills possessed by learners at the commencement of workplace learning programmes.

- Ensure workplace projects and assignments fulfil the essential measurement criteria of validity, reliability, and authenticity.
- Provide learners with frequent feedback on their progress and achievements.
- Encourage critical reflection throughout the programme.
- Provide accreditation for work-based learning programmes through the National Framework of Qualifications.

For employers:

- Direct more energy and effort towards motivating employees to see value and to engage in higher-levels skill development.
- Allocate a workplace mentor to help the student identify their individual learning needs, apply knowledge to practice, and act as a resource for the student's development.
- Encourage employees to have a greater sense of responsibility for individual and continuing professional development.
- Develop a clear sense of purpose for workplace projects and assignments and the personal rewards that can come from them.
- Consolidate the workplace as a place of knowledge production.

It is clear there are many considerations for the implementation of workplace learning for both third-level institutions and employers. Work-based learning, however, also presents considerable implications and challenges for learners. In workplace learning programmes, learners have to deal with the complexities of being both a worker and learner, and having increased responsibility in the learning process. While flexibility in both process and content is an important part of the appeal for both the organisation and the learner/employee, flexibility has to be provided and timetabled. Learners, their organisations, and academics demand this. It is important that boundaries are constructed within an educational framework that maintain academic standards while at the same time provide guidelines and practices that make explicit the educational parameters within which workplace learning partnership awards are to be negotiated, organised, and assessed.

9. Conclusions

Overall, it is clear from the results of the research carried out that third-level institutions need to adopt a more proactive approach in developing workplace learning courses and, in particular, engaging in consultation with employers and employees. There are many opportunities for third-level providers to utilise more distance-learning tools and to make the transition from an over-reliance on traditional course delivery mechanisms that are currently in place. There is little doubt that current models of workplace learning and practices are evolving and will change considerably over the next decade. There are varied levels of emphasis and extent of provision of workplace learning courses, which in some instances are driven by the institutional mission, while in others it happens as a by-product. In tackling the workplace learning agenda, institutions have started to create an environment that enables them to respond in a timely manner to identified employer needs. Building and sustaining longer-term closer relationships between the higher education providers and employers will have to

underpin any drive by higher education institutes to expand their role in supporting workforce development.

It is interesting to note that of the courses currently on offer, none of the participating third-level institutes offers a full programme leading to a qualification in workplace learning. For workplace learning programmes to be truly work-based and learner-centred, they typically commence with a structured review and evaluation of current learning. This, in turn, challenges the education institution to move beyond the traditional concept of the recognition of prior learning, to formally recognise learner-defined learning for possible inclusion in a future workplace learning programme.

Rapidly changing workplace environments, increasingly influenced by accelerating developments in information and communications technology, require new models of training and education from higher education institutions. Higher education in general, as well as organisational learning and workplace learning in particular, has to draw on the valuable resource of prior learning in the workplace. Prior learning must be more readily and formally recognised for its solid and valuable contribution to third-level education. The more static curricula of yesterday's education systems cannot serve the demands of today or tomorrow. As change in the workplace is at the cutting edge of new demands for training and education, it is the workplace that has, of necessity, to inform much of the training and education curricula of tomorrow. A paradigm shift is required in third-level education, as new and ever-changing curricula will continually and dynamically be informed by the workplace, to address student requirements in the twenty-first century.

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