

## Conclusion

Work-based learning is increasing in popularity right across the education system. There is still however, a difference in the approach used by the different sectors. Higher education has a preference for outcome-based approaches, which can make progression from the competence-based qualifications favoured in further education problematic. There are other difficulties associated with learning in the workplace; nevertheless work-based learning very much suits the needs of many learners, especially those who need to stay in full time employment while studying, and it is becoming increasingly recognised as a valid and rewarding mode of study.

## Sources

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# Work-based Learning

This article is aimed at practitioners in learning centres engaged with designing programmes, providing advice or supporting learners who wish to undertake learning while remaining in work.



## What is it and why is it becoming important?

Work-based learning could probably be best defined as learning that takes place primarily at work, through work and for work. However, especially in higher education, some of the associated learning may well take place outside of the workplace. This is in contrast to forms of what might be called workplace learning that might be offered in the work place, but not use work itself, as part of the process of learning, for example, language lessons offered during lunch-breaks.

Work-based learning is becoming an increasingly popular route to obtain qualifications. There are probably two reasons for this. The first is that almost all skill-based awards are offered through this route, notably the Modern Apprenticeship scheme and the Vocational Qualifications approved and accredited by the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).

In addition, in the higher education sector, universities are being encouraged both to increase access to higher education and to find sources of income that do not come from the state. Work-based learning programmes, which are often funded by the learner or the employer, or both, help income generation and reach learners who cannot undertake learning full time because they are employed.

Work-based learning is becoming an increasingly popular route to obtain qualifications

## What about the learners?

From the learners' point of view there are obvious benefits:

- learners can learn while they continue to earn. This can be of vital importance if a learner decides that he or she needs a qualification mid-career and is in no position to give up work.
- in both competence-based and outcome-based approaches (see below) learners should be supported either by college or university based tutors or, in the case of most vocational qualifications, qualified trainers who either belong to the organisation the learner works for or who work for an approved training organisation. The same applies to assessing evidence: qualified staff must be used.
- the learning is relevant. One of the most common complaints that is heard from both employers and learners alike is that the learning provided in 'traditional' programmes is not relevant to the job. Because work-based learning is designed to be undertaken through work, it should not have that weakness.

tutors in learning centres might want to advise potential learners both about the possibility of pursuing work-based routes and the likely benefits of these routes.



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Involving all parties – the learning provider, employers, employees and their representatives - in the design and development of work-based learning programmes can help address some problems

Learners can learn while they continue to earn

### Do learning centres have a role?

Despite the obvious focus on the workplace, learning centres may still have a role to play. Of course, some learning centres are situated in work places so their support role is obvious, but many are not. However, for example, work based learners often need Information and Computing Technology (ICT) support that learning centres can provide, even if it is simply to help learners to meet the common requirement that work that has to be submitted for the purposes of assessment is word processed. Increasingly however, work based learning programmes, both in higher education and for the purposes of acquiring vocational qualifications, are leaning more and more heavily on information technology to provide records of learning as well as accessing support for learning. This topic is explained in more detail in the associated article "e-portfolios".

In a learning centre, if someone has chosen to consider a work-based route, tutors should explain the level of support that is available through learndirect scotland especially in relation to e-portfolios.

### Different approaches to work-based learning

There are two different approaches to accreditation of work-based learning in Scotland – outcome-based and competence-based.

By and large outcome-based approaches are adopted in higher education programmes of work-based learning and competence-based models are used in the vocational qualifications and Modern Apprenticeships. There are, however, two important points to note. Some higher education Institutions have approved competence-based awards and N/SVQs are also offered at levels 4 and 5, which are considered to be at higher education level. (See the Learning Principles Toolkit article on SCQF mapping)

### Competence-based approaches

A competence-based approach works on the basis that learners meet a statement of competence which includes:

- the ability to perform in a range of work related activities
- the underpinning skills, knowledge and understanding required for performance in that area of employment

(For more detail on how SVQs work, see Learning Principles Toolkit article "e-learning and SVQs")

The learning is relevant

### Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes by contrast, try to define what an individual learner will achieve as a result of a programme of learning in terms of knowledge, skills and understanding.

It is worth inviting potential learners to consider whether they would feel more at home with an approach that emphasises the measurement of performance, that competence-based programmes emphasise, as opposed to demonstrating knowledge and understanding that outcome-based programmes emphasise. Of course there is always an element of 'horses for courses'. Learning to drive a car, for example, ultimately demands a competence-based approach.

### Are there no problems with work-based learning then?

There are many different and sometimes contradictory notions and definitions of competence both within the UK and internationally.

In addition to concerns about its definition there are also issues around what it is we are actually assessing when we seek to measure competence. For example, will demonstrating competence in one context mean that you can demonstrate that competence in another, different context?

Learning outcomes are also viewed by some as creating barriers to effective learning. They tend to break down learning into 'modules' or even smaller 'chunks' and consequently, it is argued, make it more difficult to present a coherent picture of, for example, a highly complicated and interrelated area of skill or professional practice.

There are other practical issues including:

- inflexible programmes that do not take account of the rapidly changing working environment
- cynicism on the part of employees who may believe the programme is only of value to the needs of their employers
- learning providers failing to provide sufficient support for employees whose experience of the formal educational system is limited
- employees anxious that failing to meet the standards of the programme will 'expose' them to their workmates
- insufficient time and/or resources being made available by employers
- failure to complete the programme: the Modern Apprenticeship completion rate, for example, is poor

Involving all parties – the learning provider, employers, employees and their representatives - in the design and development of work based learning programmes can help address some of these problems.

It is worth making learners aware of the potential difficulties as well as the benefits of the work-based route. If they work somewhere where there is a union tutors could suggest that they talk to the Union Learning Representative, or alternatively careers and guidance service, before making a decision.