



VALUE ADDED PERFORMANCE AND ITS RECOGNITION IN THE WORKPLACE – RESULTS FROM WBLQUAL, AN EU FUNDED PROJECT

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Abstract

Employers are often less interested in qualifications of their employees rather than in their high performance. The aim of the Erasmus research project “WBLQUAL – An Approach to Qualification through Negotiated Work Based Learning for the EU” is to find a more effective way of improving skills and behaviours of employees through the use of academic workbased learning (WBL) programmes.

The research tools used in the research include: (a) Country Specific Reports, focusing on overall situation related to WBL; (b) Online Questionnaires addressed to both employers and workbased learners; (c) Case Studies, aiming to highlight the already existing WBL best practices within companies, as well as in relation to learners and educators.

The presentation discusses the main findings of the research, particularly one of the biggest challenges in WBL – alignment of academic assessment and performance monitoring/measuring in the workplace. It is a challenge because three participants involved in WBL have different expectations from the learning process and these expectations should be aligned not only through appropriate learning content, but also through negotiated awareness of learning outcomes and usage of adequate assessment methods and quality criteria. Moreover, Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must engage with employers in order to enable their effective contribution to the assessment process.

The paper presents a theoretical background of the tripartite view of assessment or, in other words, all three participants’ perception of assessment in WBL. Therefore, the paper seeks to answer the main research question: how assessment needs to be modified to support WBL in more effective way?

The presentation forms a part of the WBLQUAL ‘section’ of the conference.

Keywords: workbased learning, performance measuring, learning assessment.

1 FOREWORD

The paper belongs to a series of publications regarding tripartite view on WBL. It is based on investigations reported in [1] and together with [2], [3], [4], [5], and [6] forms the conference’s section ‘WBLQUAL’ devoted to the results of the project “An Approach to Qualifications through Negotiated Work Based Learning for the EU - WBLQUAL” [7], project Number: 510022-LLP-1-2010-1-UK-ERASMUS-ECUE.

The Project WBLQUAL, its aim, objectives, and methodology are described in [2] while the rest of ‘WBLQUAL’ section’s papers focus on particular aspects of tripartite view on WBL.

The main objective of the research presented in this paper is to answer the question “How assessment needs to be modified to support WBL in more effective way?”

2 WBL VS CLASSROOM LEARNING

Traditional learning is typically associated with the classroom mode of learning where learning and teaching activities related to a specific subject take place in a specific time and place and a teacher plays a central role in the learning process. According to [8], WBL is a learning level derived from undertaking paid or unpaid work. It includes learning for work (e.g. work placements), learning at work (e.g. company in-house training programmes), and learning through work, linked to formally accredited further or higher education programmes. The presented paper considers WBL in the context of learning through work.

WBL is different from classroom learning in a number of important ways [9], first of all:



- a) WBL is centred around reflection on work practices; it is not merely a question of acquiring knowledge and a set of technical skills (though these can be important), but a case of reviewing and learning from experience;
- b) WBL views learning as arising from action and problem-solving within a working environment, and this is centred around live projects and challenges to individuals and organisations.

Since its main audience is adults in full- or part-time employment who wish to study part-time, the philosophy of WBL is to regard learners as self-directed problem-solvers who bring their personal skills, knowledge, and attitudes to the learning situation [8].

3 ASSESSMENT AND PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT

3.1 Assessment in general

The term *assessment* is generally used to refer to all activities teachers use to help students learn and to gauge student progress [10]. Educational assessment is the process of documenting, usually in measurable terms, knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs [11].

The most essential measurement criteria of assessment are validity, reliability, and authenticity [8].

Validity means to what extent the interpretation of the results will be appropriate, meaningful, and useful. Simply speaking, it puts the following question: does the assessment measure what it was intended to measure?

Reliability means to what extent the results will be free from errors. By simple words any differences found in traits between two different people to be based on real differences between the individuals and not be due to inconsistencies in the measuring instrument.

Authenticity means there is certainty that the work being assessed has been produced through the intellectual endeavour of the learner. Therefore, the main question is: "Is it certain the learner has produced the work?"[9].

3.2 Assessment of WBL

The unique nature of WBL and its assessment is manifested in the following[12]:

- a) WBL centres on reflection about work practices and the process of learning;
- b) WBL is more process-oriented than classroom-based learning, with stronger elements of action and problem-solving;
- c) WBL in this context is not an 'add-on' to the programme being studied, but in fact it is central to it.

It is noted [13] that assessment needs to be of a type that 'generates appropriate student learning activity', assessment tasks should require students to demonstrate learned components by using principles of learning, and to validate their conclusions by reflecting, critically and effectively, upon their experiences throughout learning [14].

Assessment methods encourage learners to solve important work-related problems, and to understand and use academic theories and models in doing so. They expect learners to be self-motivated but also self-reflective, to work with others (perhaps in peer groups) and even to assess both their own performance and that of their peers [9].

The measurement issues of validity, reliability, and authenticity are just as important to WBL as to traditional learning.

3.3 Performance measurement

Employers are often less interested in qualifications of their employees rather than in their high performance. Essentially, performance measurement analyses the success of efforts by comparing data on what actually happened to what was planned or intended. Performance measurement usually uses the following indicators of performance [15]:

- *Quantity* - the number of units produced, processed, or sold;



- *Quality* of work performed can be measured by several means; the percentage of work output that must be redone or is rejected is one such indicator;
- *Timeliness* - how fast work is performed; in manufacturing it might be the number of units produced per hour;
- *Cost-Effectiveness* - the cost of work performed; for example, customer-service representative's performance is indicated by the percentage of calls that he/she must escalate to more experienced and expensive representatives.

Performance indicators must be assessed by some means in order to measure performance itself. Here are the most often used ways for assessment of the above mentioned indicators of performance [15]:

- *Manager Appraisal* is by nature top-down and does not encourage the employee's active participation; it is often met with resistance, because the employee has no investment in its development;
- *Self-Appraisal* often can highlight discrepancies between employee and management;
- *Peer Appraisal* - employees in similar positions appraise an employee's performance and are often effective at focusing an employee's attention on undesirable behaviours and motivating change;
- *Team Appraisal* - members, holding different positions, appraise each other's work.

There are as many indicators of performance as there are companies and jobs. The various assessment methods usually are used in combinations.

4 PROJECT FINDINGS

4.1 Sources of findings

Findings presented in the paper, first of all, are based on the secondary study of data regarding UK Information Technology (IT) sector, UK Healthcare sector (H&C), Italian childcare sector, Latvian IT sector, Polish business sector, and Danish tourism sector [1].

Moreover, the findings are based also upon primary information derived from 105 questionnaires filled by learners in four participating countries: 32 in UK, 7 in Italy, 25 in Poland, and 41 in Latvia [1]. Large, medium and small companies are presented in the survey almost equally. Micro-companies are presented as well. Almost half of respondents represent IT sector, whereas Health and Social Care, Finance and Insurance, Educational Services, and Retail Trade sectors altogether form another third part of participants. The rest of sectors are presented scanty – about 1 percent for each. Private companies are presented almost as more as twice as public. Majority of respondents (86%) are full-time employees, another 14% almost equally share part-time and contract employees. About 80% of respondents have recently (1-3 years ago) completed an academic programme. Overwhelming majority (93%) has experience of full-time study within HEI.

The last source of primary information are in-depth interviews of people with different profiles, namely: 2 learners from UK (Occupational Therapist in a Healthcare Trust and Information Technologist in a Healthcare Trust), 2 learners from Italy (Educator from Private Childcare Sector and Educator in a public kindergarten for children aged from 3 to 6), 2 learners from Latvia (doctoral degree student and master degree student, both working in IT Sector) as well as 2 interviews with people responsible for education in International Company providing Engineering Software and International Company in the Banking Sector in Poland [1].

4.2 Assessment in academic programmes

To the question "Which of the following types of assessment best describe those you were given in your academic programme?" respondents participating in the survey answered as follows:

- 51% - examination
- 24% - reports
- 14% - multiple choice tests
- 8% - vivas
- 8% - essays
- 6% - observation
- 4% - presentation
- 2% - research papers

- 2% - others

It is quite predictable that the most often used methods of assessment within academic programmes are examinations, reports, and tests. Examination has the highest level of concordance of validity, reliability, and authenticity in regards to knowledge. Having almost the same level of validity and reliability as examination, reporting as an assessment method is worse in terms of authenticity. Testing as a method of assessment has good (maybe even best within 3 leaders) levels of reliability and authenticity, however, its validity is lower than in 2 previous cases.

Answering the question “In your opinion to what extent were the assessments in your academic programme aimed at assessing?”, respondents had to evaluate answers using the scale: 1 (not aimed) – 5 (totally aimed). Overall ratings within participated countries were:

- Academic knowledge – 4.3
- Work-based knowledge – 2.82
- Work-based performance – 2.54

The results clearly show that assessment methods applied in HEIs are rather good appropriate to assessing of academic knowledge, however, they are not suitable enough for assessment of work-related characteristics.

To the question “Besides academic specific skills/knowledge have any of the following been assessed?” respondents participating in the survey answered as follows:

- 71% - team working skills
- 68% - attendance
- 68% - oral communication skills
- 54% - time management
- 50% - general IT skills
- 45% - written communication skills
- 37% - leadership
- 33% - punctuality
- 33% - motivation
- 29% - organising
- 29% - management skills

The results show that not only academic knowledge/skills are assessed within academic programmes, but also a wide range of soft skills and behavioural characteristics are taken into account. It gives reasons to believe that academic assessment could be adaptable to the needs and aspiration of employers if needed, namely for assessing factors influencing value-added work performance – team working skills, time management, etc.

4.3 Assessment of work-based component

To the question “Did (does) your formal academic qualification contain a work-based component?” respondents participating in the survey answered as follows:

- 46% - placement
- 19% - internship
- 9% - work experience.

It is interesting that 27% of respondents reported that their academic qualification does not contain work-based components at all. It is necessary also to point out that such very suitable for WBL work-based component as work experience is undeservingly little used.

Answering the question “Who was responsible for the assessment of the work-based component?” the answers received were distributed as follows:

- 41% - a work-based supervisor
- 33% - both an academic tutor and a work-based supervisor
- 7% - only an academic tutor
- 2% - somebody other.

Seventeen percents of respondents stated that their work-based component was not assessed at all. It causes doubts regarding keeping of the criteria of *fairness*, mentioned by many authors e.g. [12] as an integral part of assessment measurement.

Answering the question about which body writes or wrote the assessment criteria for their assessment respondents mentioned:

- 59% - HEI
- 35% -an employer
- 8% -an external organization or an accreditation body
- 8% - somebody other.

Despite that the previous set of answers shows that in three quarters of cases a work-based supervisor takes responsibility (solely or together with an academic tutor) for assessment of work-based components, the last set of answers, in its turn, shows that this assessment in majority of cases was done according to criteria written by HEIs. Obviously, it diminishes the role of employers in the process of assessment.

Respondents' answers to the question "What methods of assessment were used for assessing the work-based component?" were the following:

- 84% - reports
- 38% - observation
- 36% - presentation
- 20% - vivas
- 9% - essays
- 7% - research papers
- 5% - others
- 4% - multiple choice tests
- 4% - examination

Reporting is the predominant method of assessment of work-based components within academic programmes despite of the fact that this method of assessment has obviously low level of authenticity in regard to working skills and abilities. Observation has higher level of authenticity than reporting, but lower level in regards to reliability and even more in validity. In turn, presentation being more valid than observation at the same time is less reliable. Vivas look like the most appropriate method of assessment in terms of concordance of validity, reliability, and authenticity. However, it is not widely applied probably due to high level of efforts required from an assessor.

Answering the question of whether their employer contributed to the grade they were given for assessment of the work-based component, respondents pointed:

- 42% - yes, their employer formally contributed
- 32% - yes, their employer contributed informally
- 26% - no, their employer did not contribute to their grade at all.

It is extremely interesting that the presented figures completely coincide with data regarding responsibility for the assessment described earlier. When a work-based supervisor has sole responsibility than he/she contributes to the grade formally while if a work-based supervisor shares responsibility for assessment with an academic tutor then he/she contributes informally, that, in turns, means that employer most probably does not contribute to the grade at all.

When respondents were asked about similarity of the policies and procedures for work-based assessments and traditional assessments, the received considerations were as follows:

- 43% - in feedbacks
- 38% - in submission regulations
- 29% - in grading criteria
- 14% - in rules for referrals and re-sits.

Just one of three employees considers that grading criteria of traditional assessment coincide within criteria of work-based assessment. This corresponds with the already above mentioned data regarding types of assessment when reports (the most often used for assessment outside academic programmes – specifically



in 84% of cases) are used within the academic programme three time rare (specifically in 24% cases). This gives reasons to assume that assessments methods applied primarily are dependent on fixed criteria.

Rating overall academic assessment taken during the work, respondents used the scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree) and provided the following evidence:

- The grade I was given accurately reflected my job performance – 3.58
- The assignment set was relevant to my job – 3.58
- The content of the assessment was useful to improve my job performance – 3.23

Here there is some contradiction in answers given by respondents. Despite of the fact that they consider that assessments in their academic programme do not aimed at assessing of work-based characteristics (see 4.2), nevertheless they consider that assessment set is rather relevant to their job and that grades they are given accurately reflect their job performance. Additional research regarding these issues is required.

4.4 Performance measurement

Information derived from the secondary research [1] pointed out that assessment of the learner's performance at work outside of academic programmes is predominantly made by interviews examining expectations regarding work assignments, job satisfaction, competency, and career development. These interviews more often are conducted by line managers and they end up with a written agreement between the manager and the employee regarding further employee's development.

Criteria for performance measurement differ from sector to sector [1]. However, in the majority of cases they include:

- quality of job results
- job-related knowledge and skills
- organizational skills
- quantity of job outputs.

Often the learner's own portfolio of work provides sufficient evidence to the HEI and employer to demonstrate work-based competence.

It is not a surprise that employers much more value direct practical skills rather than theoretical knowledge. They consider that appropriate practical skills could allow learners to start quickly in the labour market. Very often proficiency in English is mentioned as one of the mandatory skills. Employers noted rather good knowledge of informal language, but lack of technical concepts. Ignorance of technical concepts in frequent cases can lead to a technical mistake.

Employees, in their turn, pointed out that assessment criteria set by an employer are much more relevant to their job, more useful to improve their job performance and acquired grades more accurately reflect their job performance.

Answering the question "Who is responsible for assessing performance at work?", frequencies of respondents' answers were as follows:

- 90% - line manager
- 22% -peers
- 3% - other (not considered in the Questionnaire).

It is not surprisingly that in majority of cases it is a line manager. However, rather unpredictable is that not one of the respondents has mentioned Human Resources.

Answering the question "What best describes the methods and approaches used by employers in the assessment of your performance in the workplace (outside of academic programmes)?", respondents pointed:

- 46% - appraisal
- 26% -career programme development (CPD) targets
- 24% -career increments.

Answers to the question "Which of the following best describes the type of assessment that you have?" were as follows:

- 68% - manager appraisal
- 40% - informal
- 33% - formal
- 30% - self-appraisal
- 19% - customer appraisal
- 19% - peer appraisal
- 12% - professional development objectives (PDO)
- 10% - team appraisal
- 5% - “Full-circle” appraisal
- 1% - assessment centre

Regarding self-assessment the majority of respondents (70%) considered that their performance at work is very good, while 8% - excellent and 18% - improving. Not one of the respondents evaluated their performance as not good. Herewith 80% of respondents have based their consideration on feedback from line managers, 66% - on self-awareness, 65% - on feedbacks from colleagues, and 46% - on feedbacks from customers.

4.5 Assessment differences

When respondents were asked to rank using the scale from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree) what best describes their opinion when comparing academic assessment with employer's job performance assessment, the given ranks were as follows:

- The feedback I am given is similar – 2.72
- The criteria I am judged by are similar – 2.47
- The skills I am assessed on are similar – 2.47
- The way I am assessed is similar – 2.37

It is very surprisingly that despite of obvious lack of correspondence in assessments just less than half of respondents (46%) consider that employer's and academic assessment should be more closely aligned while the rest 54% think that it is not necessary.

Those who consider that they should be closely aligned ranked the way in what they should be more aligned as follows (1 - totally disagree, 5 -totally agree):

- The feedback I am given – 3.95
- The criteria I am judged by – 3.65
- The skills I am assessed on – 3.41
- The way I am assessed – 2.29

Derived data clearly show employees' needs and aspirations regarding assessment. Despite of the fact that they consider that existing methods of academic assessment are the most similar to employer's job performance assessment regarding the feedback employees are given, they (employees) would like to have this similarity even closer. The same could be observed for the rest of considered factors – as closer already similarities are as even closer employees desire that they should be.

Answering the question “Would a closer alignment result in any of the following?” considerations of respondents were:

- 45% - more value of the assessment to me personally
- 40% - more encouragement for me to improve my performance at work
- 24% - more value of the assessment to my employer.

Here are just considerations of learners. For making conclusions regarding benefits of similarities they should be compared with the vision of employers and HEIs.

5 WAYS OF IMPROVEMENTS

The novel and innovative nature of WBL requires that non-traditional means have had to be found for assessing it, such as approaches that meet (sometimes differing) needs of learners, employers, and HEIs. A balance is needed between competency-based assessment (output) and assessment of process (reflection,

self-direction). Aim of assessment is twofold: a) to assure quality of provision and achievement (with direct link to learning outcomes) and b) to develop a student as a reflective practitioner [12], [14]. In addition this must be done within appropriate quality benchmark standards and/or professional standards, and with due regard for the workplace setting in order to promote an authentic context [14]. Therefore, the use of traditional assessment methods such as formal examinations is entirely inappropriate to the philosophy, educational objectives, and adult target audience of WBL [8].

Assessment can take different forms and types, for example, formative (carried out throughout a course or project with aim to aid learning) vs. summative (carried out at the end of a course or project with aim to assign students a course grade) [16, 17], objective (a form of questioning which has a single correct answer) vs. subjective (a form of questioning which may have more than one correct answer or more than one way of expressing the correct answer), informal (occurs in a casual manner without contribution to a student's final grade and may include observation, inventories, checklists, rating scales, etc.) vs. formal (implies a written document, such as a test, quiz, or paper and provides a numerical score or grade based on student performance) [18], etc.

According to [19], assessment can be based on: (a) actual (live) practice, (b) some sort of recording of practice, (c) artefacts produced as a consequence of practice, (d) some sort of commentary on practice (ideally, reflective), (e) some more general disquisition relating to practice, and/or (f) combinations of the above.

Steps can be taken to check the authenticity of work through a number of quality assurance procedures, that are standard to most programmes that involve elements of continuous assessment, including the moderation of all written assessments by members of the course team, providing the external examiner with access to all written assessments, and an oral examination, so that the assignment or project has to be defended by the learner [9].

The authenticity of work can be demonstrated through the use of vivas and presentations, often involving the contribution of managers or programme sponsors. Indeed, assessment processes may change from being the sole remit of the academic tutor into a partnership between tutors, employers, and even learners (through critical self-reflection) [8], [9].

The link between learner's objectives and the outputs of learning can be bridged through the use of learning contracts. While the development of WBL offers HEI important opportunities for partnership with companies and organisations, the complex nature of assessment and accreditation present new challenges, both in terms of assessment and quality assurance [8].

To perform qualitative work-related assessment, instruments such as examinations and essays which form part of 'traditional' academic assessment methods need to be expanded to take into account workplace contextualised tasks, activities, and outcomes, organizational quality assurance systems and the impact learner's peers and colleagues at workplace. For example, problem solving activities, workshops, learning packages, and literature synthesis can enable them to develop practical capabilities and reflective practice, which can result in a positive organisational impact [14].

It is assumed that workbased learners are self-directed, bringing personal experience and motivation to the learning situation. Assessment methods need, therefore, to be tailored to a student-centred, problem-based approach [8]. Assessment should promote analytical and problem-solving skills, encourage personal development and enhance communication skills. Workplace assessment tasks need to enable learners to demonstrate higher level thinking and knowledge by deploying a number of suitable assessment tools such as journals, learning plans and contracts, work performance portfolios and live projects in conjunction with academic assessment such as examinations and essay writing [14].

For the learner-centred and problem-centred approach the following assessment methods look as underestimated though they are rather appropriate [8], [14]:

- *Self assessment* can involve students in either evaluating their own work or even grading it against criteria set by a tutor;
- *Assignments and projects* may be useful to specify a range of marking criteria and weightings to the following categories: (a) Operational context; (b) Knowledge and understanding; (c) Cognitive and intellectual skills; (d) Practical skills; and (e) Key/transferable skills;



- *Portfolios* allow to present evidence of achievement, and comprise the amalgamation of documents, including reports, correspondence, minutes of meetings, email communications and perhaps also tape recordings, videos and graphical material.

6 CONCLUSIONS

Assessment of work-based component in academic programmes does not reflect learners' job performance because assessment methods used take into account validity, reliability and authenticity related to the place of activities (out of HEI's primacies). However, they do not consider primary aspects of performance measurement – quantity and quality of work performed, its time-line and cost-effectiveness which are more important for employers than their employees' theoretical knowledge.

Assessment within academic programmes besides of specific academic skill/knowledge includes also such skills like oral and written communication skills important for added-value performance. However, due to the fact that employers stress importance of proficiency in technical English as one of the mandatory skills these aspects should be more reflected within soft skills assessed in HEIs.

Such work-based component of a formal academic qualification as work experience is obviously underestimated so far and should be implemented more widely.

Employers should take more important role in formulating criteria for assessment of work-based component and therefore more align assessed skills and abilities to those required for performance of job.

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DISCLAIMER

This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

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